

"Simon Kernick writes, with his foot
pressed hard on the pedal. Hang on tight!"

—MARTIN AMIS

**SIMON
KERNICK**

**THE MURDER
EXCHANGE**

**THE CURRENCY
IS DEATH**

The Murder Exchange

by

Simon Kernick

Also by Simon Kernick

THE BUSINESS OF DYING
THE CRIME TRADE

THE MURDER
EXCHANGE

Simon Kernick

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Although virtually all the places where the events of this book take place exist, some of the residential street names are intentionally fictional.

There is no feeling in the world more hopeless, more desperate, more frightening, than when you are standing looking at the end of a gun that's held steadily and calmly by someone you know is going to kni you. And impotent, too. It's an impotent feeling realizing that nothing you do or say, no pleading, no begging, nothing, is going to change the dead angle of that weapon, or prevent the bullet from leaving it and entering your body, ripping up your insides, and ending every experience, every thought, every dream you've ever had. You think about people you care about, places you've been to that you liked, and you know you're never going to see any of them again. Your guts churn, the nerves in your lower back jangle so wildly that you think you're going to soil yourself, your legs feel like they're going to go from under you like those newborn calves you sometimes see on the telly. And your eyes. You know that your eyes betray your sense of complete and utter defeat.

You are a dead man, and you know it.

And then two things happened.

Tuesday, nineteen days ago

Iversson

To tell you the truth, I knew Roy Fowler was trouble the minute I laid eyes on the bastard. His eyes were too close together for a start, and the eyebrows joined up werewolf-style which, according to a book I once read, is always a bad sign. I didn't like the nose either, or the fake tan, but I wouldn't have let that stand in the way of business. If I was that fussy, I'd be broke. But there was something in the way he walked that put me on my guard, with his eyes carefully registering everyone in the room, like he half-expected one of them to jump up at any minute and put a richly deserved bullet in his back. He might have tried to hide it by dressing in a smart, well-cut suit and putting an easy smile on his face as soon as he saw me, but I could tell you this straight away: Roy Fowler was one of the world's guilty.

I stood up as he approached and we shook hands. His grip was tight but a real moist one, and I had to stop myself from wiping my

hand down my shirt once I'd pulled it away.

'Mr Iversson ...'

'Mr Fowler. Take a seat.'

He plonked himself down on the stool opposite me and took another look round. He didn't seem entirely comfortable. 'Are you sure it's all right to talk here?'

'Someone once told me that this branch of Pizza Hut is the best place to hold a lunchtime meeting if you don't want to be overheard. It's because it's all you can eat.'

He raised a hairy eyebrow. 'So?'

'So, apparently it only attracts women with lots of kids, and people who live for their food. The women have to keep chasing after the kids and Jic rest of them are far too busy concentrating on what's in front of them to listen to anyone else's conversation. You're meant to be able to spot someone who doesn't fit in a mile off.'

He had another quick look round and pretty much got confirmation of what I'd said. There couldn't have been more than a dozen people in the place, spread out amongst the formica tables and booths, all of them single and at least five stone too hefty, except for one harassed young mum with bad hair who was there with her three shrieking preteen delinquents.

The can't see how they can make any money/ said Fowler distastefully, wiping his brow. The day was hot and close and he was definitely overdressed.

'You ever heard of a poor fast-food chain? Course they make money. It's just tomato ketchup and dough. Maybe a bit of cheese and some cheap meat

[decorate. I bet the bloke who owns the franchise

ives a Porsche and smokes Cuban cigars.'

Toil reckon?'

I nodded. 'Definitely. His name's Marco.'

The waitress, a pasty-faced teenager who looked like she sampled the products a little too regularly herself, sidled over and asked for his order. I'd already eaten before I got there (none of that all you-can-eat crap for me) and was nursing my second Becks. 'Just a Coke/ he told her, without § bothering to look up. **'''

She went off and he removed his jacket. A bead of sweat dribbled down the side of his face.

'So, what can I do for you?' I asked, getting to the point.

Fowler sighed and gave me a hawkish look. I thought that he probably wouldn't have been too || bad looking if it hadn't been for the eyes. 'I need some security. I was recommended to speak to you about it.'

'So you said on the phone. Who's been doing my advertising for me, then?'

He paused for a moment while the waitress returned with his drink. He waited until she'd gone before he spoke. 'Johnny Hexham. You used to go to school with him, didn't you?'

Teah, that's right.' Johnny had been a good friend of mine once. A nice bloke and popular with the ladies, but not the most honest of Johns. He'd probably want something for the recommendation. Whether he got it or not depended on what came next. 'What sort of security are you after?'

Fowler continued to stare at me intensely, like he

thought his gaze somehow made the person being stared at want to trust him. It didn't. If he'd have told me I had two legs, I'd have looked down to check. 'I have a meeting that I need to attend in a couple of nights' time. The people I'm meeting with are not what I'd describe as trustworthy. I've got a feeling that if I turn up on my own, then they might consider that a sign of weakness and take advantage. I'd rather have some backup.'

'What did Johnny Hexham say about me?'

'He said that you fronted a reliable outfit and that you knew what you were doing. Those are the two things I'm most interested in.'

'That's good. I hope he also said that I like to play things straight. That I'm not interested in getting ', o!ved in loads of shit that's going to get me put inside for years on end. I make a good living, Mr Fowler. It's not fantastic, sometimes it can even be boring, and a lot of the people we guard make more money in a day than I see in a month, sometimes even a year, but it's still a good living, and I don't want to trade it in for a room with bars on the windows. Know what I mean?'

'I understand all that. And I'm not asking you to do anything that you wouldn't normally consider doing. This is just one night's work, one meeting, and all I want is to have people behind me that I can rely on if things turn a bit tasty.'

'Are they likely to?'

He shook his head. 'No. It's in the interests of the people I'm meeting as much as mine to make this thing work.'

'And this meeting ... what exactly is it about?'

Tern ask a lot of questions, Mr Iversson.'

That's why I'm still here. I make it a point to know as much as possible about what I might be getting involved in.'

'Fair enough. I've got something they want, and they've got something I want. It's an exchange.'

That doesn't help me much. I need to know what you're exchanging.'

Why?'

'Because for all I know you could be carrying twenty kilos of coke and they could be undercover coppers. I once had a mate who was asked to deliver a package to an address in Regent's Park. He never knew what was in it. Two hundred quid for half an hour's work, no questions asked. He was hardly going to say no, was he? When he turned up at the house, the bloke answering the door was from Vice Squad and he was nicked. Turns out he was carrying a load of porn mags where the models were no older than those kids over there. So you see why I want to be careful.'

'If I tell you, I don't want it going any further. Not even to whoever you bring with you, if you decide to take the job.'

I told him it wouldn't and he turned and looked over his shoulder, just to make sure no-one was listening. No-one was, and he turned back to me. 'I told you on the phone I owned a nightclub, right? Well, a couple of months back, I got an approach to buy it from some, er, businessmen. I wasn't that interested, not for the amount they wanted to pay, so I said no. They upped the offer but I still wasn't that sure. You know, I've owned the place close to

ten years and it's always made me a good living. I'm the same as you, I'm not rich, but I'm doing OK. As it happens, I thought they could still up the offer, so I held out for more, thinking that I wasn't so worried either way.'

He paused for a moment to take a gulp from his drink.

'Then things started to happen. The club started getting unsavoury elements coming in, loudmouths looking for trouble. There were fights breaking out, furnishings getting smashed, staff threatened, all that sort of shit. Then some of my doormen stopped turning up for work, saying they'd found jobs elsewhere. It didn't take me long to find out that these buyers were behind it, and that they were people who it wasn't worth messing with. A few days ago they came back and asked if I'd like to reconsider their original offer.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, what was I meant to do? I liked the place, still do, but there's no point in clinging on to the past. Especially when the future's getting ready to kick you right in the bollocks. It just wasn't worth the aggravation. So I said I'd accept the second offer but not the original.'

I managed a smile. Put in the same position, I'd have done the same thing. You never want to let them know they're winning. 'What did they say?'

'They might have been lowlifes but they were still businessmen. I think they thought they'd won some sort of victory by making me change my mind, and that was good enough for them.'

'And is it a good price, what they're offering?'

It's not bad. I could have done worse.'

'So what's the problem? Where do I come in?'

'We both want a straight exchange on neutral ground. Basically, the deeds for the money. They don't want lawyers involved and they don't want the taxman seeing any of it. They just want a straight no-hassle swap. And I'm going to get payment in cash, no questions asked. Then I just walk away. Why I need you's pretty obvious. These people might be businessmen but they're not, shall we say, averse to using physical means to get what they want. Without the law involved, I've got no guarantees that they won't just make me sign over everything for nothing. With you there, I've got a lot more chance they'll play it fair.'

'We don't usually deal with a few hours' work here and there. The stuff we do's more long term/

'This is an important deal to me. I'll make it worth your while.' Fowler took another gulp of his drink while I waited to hear how much 'worth your while' meant. 'As I said, I want three men. One of them's going to have to be you. Johnny said I should insist on you.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. He said you could keep a cool head.' I didn't say anything so he continued. 'Five grand. In cash. That's what I'll pay for you and two of your best people to come along with me.'

'That's a lot of money.'

'It's a lot less than I'll be getting out of this deal. I look at it as a worthwhile investment. One other thing...'

'What?'

'I need at least one of the people with me, preferably you, to be carrying.'

I tightened the grip on my glass. 'I don't want to get involved in anything like that, Mr Fowler.'

Fowler leant forward and I caught a whiff of his breath. It was a nasty combination of sweet and sour, like air freshener in a Gents' toilet. 'Look, I know what you're saying but I'm dealing with dangerous people here and if one of them does something stupid, like pulls a gun, I don't want it to mean the end of my retirement fund. I know your background so I know it's not something you can't handle, and it's because of that that I'm paying big money.'

'Like I told you, I'm not into doing things that are likely to get me put away, and playing around with firearms is not conducive to a free and happy life on the outside.'

'You offer protection, right? You and your employees guard people who feel threatened. Right?' I nodded, since he was pretty much on the ball there. 'Well, I feel threatened, and I want you to guard me for a period of time of what? - no more than a couple of hours tops, and for that I'm going to be paying very serious money. Now I know it's a risky assignment but it would be for what's on offer. If I wanted security to go to a council meeting to protect me in case I got waylaid by angry voters then it would be worth a lot less, but it isn't.' He paused to finish his drink. 'But you know as well as I do that there's virtually no chance anyone's going to pull anything. It's just not worth it.'

'There are a lot of nutters about these days.'

Fowler began to look frustrated. 'I need an answer. Do you want the work or not?'

The thing about life is there's always pressure to make quick decisions. Most of the time people tend just to follow their instincts and get by as well as they can. When they don't follow their instincts, they tend to make mistakes. Often big ones. And it's usually to do with money.

'Make it six/ I told him, 'and I'll do it.'

And that, of course, was my mistake.

My job's a straightforward one. I run an organization that provides security in the form of bodyguards to various minor celebrities, and the occasional dodgy businessman with something to hide, and I've done it for the last five years. Funnily enough, it tends to be a pretty uneventful business and none of our people have ever been injured in the line of duty, which I suppose says as much about our clientele as it does about us, and which is just the way I like it. I've had my days of excitement and adrenalin. They were fun enough while they lasted but I'm past all that now.

I had reservations about this particular job at the time, but in the end I reckoned that, like most businessmen, Fowler's buyers weren't going to do anything to mess up the deal. If they were getting the club at a decent price, which they probably were, then that ought to be enough for them. I know you should never forget how stupid and greedy people can be, but my feeling was that when these blokes saw that their seller had turned up with back-up, they'd be foolish to want a

confrontation. I was a bit concerned about the talk of guns but, to be honest with you, I didn't think they'd resort to that. Again, you had to ask yourself, what would be the point? There's a lot of gunplay about in London these days but most of the real psychos tend to be the kids, and they don't go round buying nightclubs.

After Fowler had gone, I tried Johnny Hexham's number, wanting to know if there was any information he could give me about the nightclub owner and the situation at his place, but he wasn't answering, so I put in a call to my partner, Joe Riggs, on the office number.

Tiger Solutions.'

I cringed like I always did when I heard that name. Tiger Solutions. I should never have let him talk me into that one. Joe reckoned it made the punters think they were dealing with a tough outfit; I thought it made us sound like a fucking wildlife charity.

'Joe, it's Max/

'Max. How'd it go with Fowler?'

I told him what the deal was, and the amount of money on offer. Joe whistled through his teeth. "That's a lot of cash. It's getting close to half of what we pulled in in the whole of last month. And in readies, too. What's the catch?'

"The buyers are the type who could turn nasty. And this Fowler, there's definitely something dodgy about him.'

Joe laughed. 'He's a nightclub owner, what do you expect? They're all dodgy, but no worse than some of the people we have to protect. Anyway, let's not turn down anything this lucrative.'

Like I said, money was always the key. You never want to say no to it. I didn't mention anything about Fowler demanding that I carry a gun on the night. There was no point. It would just complicate matters. As it happened, I wasn't even sure I was going to bother bringing one along anyway, particularly as I had no intention of using it in defence of Fowler's pension fund. If they pulled shooters, my hands were going up faster than a porn star's knob, it was as simple as that.

I told Joe there was no fear of me pulling out, not for six grand. 'I'd just like to know a little bit more about him, and the place he owns, that's all. I wouldn't mind finding out why these people want it so much.'

'You can make a lot of money in that line of business, you know that. The youth like to have a good time.'

Teah, maybe. So, are you going to come with me on this one, then?'

'When is it?'

'Thursday night.'

'This Thursday?'

'Yeah.'

'Ah shit, I can't, Max. I'm looking after Terri.'

Terri Dennett was a singer, and not a particularly good one at that, with a drugs problem and an ego that was a lot bigger than her talent. Whenever she attended record company events or awards ceremonies she had to be accompanied by a minder who had the dual task of making sure the paparazzi never got too close to her - not that they usually tried too hard - and preventing her from sneaking

off and taking too many drugs, and consequently making a fool of herself. Tiger Solutions had the contract for looking after her and she insisted on Joe being the one who escorted her on her various outings. He had the right level of seniority, and the patience to be able to put up with her. I didn't. I'd taken her once and it had all ended in tears. She'd managed to blag some coke while in the Ladies, vacuumed it up her nose in one go, and got into a slanging match with some talentless sixteen-year old from one of those real shite boybands that make Westlife look like Pink Floyd. He'd told her she couldn't sing for shit - which was true, she couldn't - but coming from him it was an insult of the most heinous kind. I'd pulled her away before she could rip him to shreds and the bitch had turned on me, opening fire with a severe knee to the bollocks, and then adding insult to injury by tipping a glass of expensive white wine on my head while I was doubled over in agony. I don't think she'll ever know how close she came to death that night. It took an immense amount of willpower to stop myself from putting my hands around her throat and squeezing with all my strength until she was dead, but somehow I managed it, opting instead to pick her up, sling her over my shoulders, and walk right out of there, much to the joy of the paparazzi, who for once showed a real interest in filming her being removed kicking and screaming. When we got outside I'd dumped her on the pavement and walked off.

Needless to say, she hadn't asked for me again.

'You know, Joe, you've got an excuse for

everything. What's she got to go to this time?'

'Some fucking hoohah where they all tell each other what talented artists they are, even though they don't mean a word of it. A barrel of laughs it won't be. You know, if there was any other way I'd do it.'

'Sure you would. Anyway, who do you think I should take? I want a couple of decent people for this sort of thing.'

Tiger, like most security companies, didn't have any operatives on the payroll. Most of those we hired out tended to be freelancers, although we were very careful about who we used and tended to stick, wherever possible, to people we'd worked with before. We ran through a few names together and eventually decided on a shortlist of three: two we particularly wanted, and one reserve. All of them had worked with Tiger on and off for at least three years, and all were of a calibre that they could be relied upon should things suddenly decide to go tits up.

'When's he going to get us the money?' asked Joe. 'For this sort of thing, we're going to need it in advance. I don't want him running out on us.'

'It's sorted. I'm picking it up with him. I'll count it on the spot, then drop it round at the office and put it in the safe before we head out to the meet.'

'Good move. So, where's it taking place?'

'Good question. I haven't got a clue.'

'Well, if it's too far, don't forget to charge him for petrol.'

Which was Joe all over. He'd call himself careful; everyone else preferred the word tight. I laughed and hung up.

Thursday, seventeen days ago

Iversson

There were three of us in the car. Me in the front passenger seat, Eric driving, and Tony in the back. You always feel a bit nervous when the people you're dealing with are unknown and likely to be unpredictable, but at least I had reliable backup.

Like everyone we used, they were ex-military. Eric was an old associate of mine, a big beefy bloke in his early fifties. He was a Taffy who'd done fifteen years in the Welsh Borderers, and he'd been an occasional employee of ours since day one. You didn't mess about with Eric. Not only did he have a face like Frankenstein's monster, he had the body, too, with fists like sledge-hammers. He was a calm bloke, not easily given to temper, and a real old fashioned gentleman with the ladies, but if you fucked him about, you paid a high price. Once, a few years back, he'd been doing some debt collecting work for a couple of Albanians. When he'd turned up at the flat where he was going to pick up the money, he'd been greeted by the debtor

and two of his mates, all armed with pickaxe handles. According to reliable accounts, the three of them launched a full-frontal assault, weapons flailing. It was a big mistake. Eric hit the debtor so hard, the bloke's head flew back and knocked out one of the others. The third swung his pickaxe handle at Eric's head, only to have Eric grab it with one hand and break his jaw with the other, like something out of a Bruce Lee film. Enter the Welsh dragon, and all that. The whole thing took about four seconds, and immediately became local legend.

Tony was just as useful, but a lot different. Late twenties, good-looking in a public-schoolish way, he was an ex-marine who'd also worked with us on and off since the early days. He was only a little guy, no more than five nine and skinny, but he was one of the fittest, fastest people I'd ever met. I liked him, too. He had what you might call a dry wit, and he delivered his lines with all the urgency of Roger Moore's James Bond, like he might fall asleep before the end of the sentence. But there was something about him, something in the way he carried himself, that told anyone who was interested that, for all his laid-back attitude, he was not to be messed with. He was reputed to have shot an IRA gunman in Belfast in the early nineties before the first ceasefire, finishing him off when he could have taken him alive. It was something he neither confirmed nor denied, but you could believe that he'd done it. He was that sort of bloke.

I gave them a brief rundown of my meeting with Fowler, and what I'd found out since, which wasn't a lot, to be honest. Joe and I had both asked around

to see if anyone knew anything about Roy Fowler and the Arcadia, but the only person who had any information at all was Charlie White, another ex soldier who did occasional doorwork for clubs north of the river, and all he could tell me was that he'd heard it had a drugs problem.

'Surprise fucking surprise,' said Eric. They've all got a drugs problem. So, do you think there's going to be trouble?' He didn't sound like the prospect bothered him too much.

I gave him one of the most confident looks I could muster. 'Not when they see us, there won't be.'

'Famous last words,' said Tony, in that enigmatic way of his. But then, he'd never been the sort to look on the bright side.

We were picking up Fowler from a pub in Farringdon Street, not far from the Underground station. It was a busy late summer evening and darkness was beginning to settle on the lively streets of Clerkenwell as they filled up with revellers. Traffic was still bad even at this time, and I jumped out of the car fifty yards short of the pick-up point, leaving it idling in a typical urban snarl-up.

The place was crowded with students and the younger end of the office-worker crowd so Fowler, with his bad-news fake tan and middle-aged side parting, stood out like a sore thumb. He was sat at a poky little table in the corner, just in front of the Ladies, nursing a Red Bull and looking like someone had just caught him fucking an under-age girl. He was nervous - nervous and shifty - and even from some distance away I

could make out the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

As I walked towards him through a gaggle of scantily clad young ladies with loud voices, I saw he had two briefcases on his lap, one of which hopefully contained six grand in readies. You'd have thought the other contained a bomb, given the expression on his face.

'Mr Fowler. Are you ready?'

Fowler saw me for the first time and cracked a relieved smile. 'As ready as I'll ever be. Come on then, let's go.' He got to his feet unsteadily, trying to hold both briefcases in one hand. It didn't work and he dropped one. Quick as a flash, he bent down and picked it up. 'This one's yours,' he said, passing it to me in a way that was almost designed to attract attention. I took it as casually as possible, and, with him following, turned and walked back outside.

The car pulled up just as we stepped onto the pavement and I ushered Fowler into the back with Tony before jumping in the front.

'Do me a favour, Mr Fowler,' I said. 'Don't draw attention to us by handing me a briefcase in the middle of a pub. You could have given it to me back in the office.'

'Sorry, I wasn't thinking straight,' he said, clutching the other case close to his chest.

'Is everything all right?'

'Yeah, no problem. I'm just a little nervous, that's all.' He wiped the sweat off his brow with a grubby-looking handkerchief as Eric did a three point turn in the limited space available and headed back the way we'd come.

There's no need to worry/ I told him. You're in safe company.'

I introduced him to the other two. Eric just grunted an acknowledgement. He wasn't one to get over-friendly with punters, particularly when they were greasy-looking nightclub owners. Tony gave Fowler one of his half-smiles and put out a hand which was shaken just a little bit too vigorously.

The offices of Tiger Solutions were a set of rooms above a tatty-looking mobile phone shop near Highbury Corner. Eric pulled the car up in the bus lane directly outside and he and Tony waited while Fowler and I went upstairs to count the six grand.

'Have you got the gun?' he asked me as I put the money in the safe. It was all there, in fifties and I " cnties.

I looked at him closely. He was watching me, moving his weight from foot to foot, a man with far too much on his mind. 'Yeah, I've got it,' I said, making no move to show it to him.

The want to see it. I want to see that you've got it.'

His voice was almost a whine, like some spoilt kid.

This bastard was beginning to give me a bad feeling. Still, anything to shut him up. I reached under the back of my jacket and pulled the Glock 17 from the waistband of my jeans. I held it out in the palm of my hand for him to see, thinking to myself that it really was a fine piece of craftsmanship, and light as a feather, too. Say what you like about the Germans, but they do do all the important things right. Cars, football teams, porn (if you forgive the haircuts) and firearms.

He stepped over and looked cautiously down at

it, as if he half-expected it to jump up and bite him.
'It does work, doesn't it?'

'Do you know something I don't?'

What do you mean?'

'I mean, why are you so interested in whether it works or not? Do you think I'm going to have to fire it or something, because if you do, then I'm not sure I want to be coming along with you. My life and the lives of the other two men down there are worth a lot more than six grand. Do you know what I mean?'

'I wouldn't be going along myself if I thought anything was going to happen, but, just in case something does, I want to be certain that we've got some sort of backup.'

'It works/ I said, but if I have to use it, I'll be one unhappy man. And if I'm unhappy, so will you be. I promise you that.'

I opened the door, then waited while he went out, before switching off the lights and following him.

'Left here,' said Fowler.

Eric turned the wheel and the car pulled into the entrance of a deserted-looking business park surrounded by high mesh fencing. An unmanned barrier blocked our path.

'Pull up to the keypad and punch in the code. It's C234.'

Eric didn't say anything but did as he was told, and the barrier went up. The car moved inside, and carried on down to a T-junction. The single-storey building up ahead had a neon red sign identifying it as Canley Electronics.

'Stay here for a moment/ said Fowler, and jumped out of the car before any of us had a chance to ask him where he was going. As we watched, he crossed the road and walked up to a short, tatty looking hedge in front of Canley Electronics. He stopped and made a great show of looking left and then right, then bent down and pushed the briefcase underneath the hedge so that it was out of bight.

'What's he doing?' demanded Eric. 'I thought you said they were meant to be the deeds to his club/

I shrugged. 'That's what I thought/

Eric shook his head, looking troubled for the first time. 'I'm not sure about this, Max. This just doesn't look right. What with all this meeting up in the back end of nowhere .. /

'Perhaps he's just being careful/ said Tony, calm as always. 'Maybe he wants to see that they've got the money first/

'Maybe/ I mused, not feeling too convinced either. 'We've just got to keep our wits about us, that's all. Obviously these blokes are dodgier than we thought/

'Christ, I'm getting too old for this shit. I'm a granddad, for fuck's sake/

'The key to warding off old age is mental and physical exertion/ said Tony. 'My granddad did nothing but watch telly when he retired, and he went completely senile in five years. Ended up thinking that he was going out with Carol Vorderman, poor sod/

'I don't know/ I said. 'I quite like her/

'He used to send her flowers and everything. My mum and dad had to put him away in a home in the end. Lack of stimulation, that's what they said it was. Think on that one, Eric. There's a moral in there somewhere.'

Tuck off/ said Eric, giving him a dirty look. Not that there was any real malice in it. He and Tony knew each other pretty well and, as far as I knew, they got on, too. That was one of the other reasons they'd been mine and Joe's first two choices for this job.

The conversation stilled as Fowler returned to the car and got back in. 'OK, turn left and keep going until the end of the road.'

Tell me something, Mr Fowler,' I said, as the Range Rover swung left and moved slowly through the business park, crawling over the frequent speed bumps. 'How come you chose a venue like this? There must be getting on for two million buildings in this city. Surely one of them's got to be better than round here.'

'We want some privacy, that's all.'

'Christ almighty,' growled Eric. 'If you'd wanted privacy you could have come round my gaff. This is fucking ridiculous.'

'We're nearly there,' said Fowler irritably. He sat back in his seat and sighed, wiping his brow for the hundredth time that night. He looked about as comfortable as a case of piles.

Tony asked him if he was OK.

He nodded. 'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.' He didn't sound it.

'If things look like they're going to get a bit tasty,

we'll just pull out/ said Tony, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and offering Fowler one. The clubowner accepted and thanked him as he lit it. 'All part of the service/ said Tony, leaning forward and dangling the pack between me and Eric. Eric took one. I told him I'd given up.

'Oh yeah? How long's that been, then?'

Too fucking long.'

We came to another T-junction and Fowler told Eric to turn right. We were coming to the other end of the estate now and, beyond the buildings stretched out in front of us, I could make out the fence, and what looked like wasteground behind. It was eerily silent here, a lonely oasis in the middle of Ilie city. The sort of place where the killers in kids' nightmares lurk.

The think it's here, up ahead/ said Fowler.

Looming up on our right-hand side, about fifty yards in front and partially obscured by trees, was a large whitebrick warehouse, bigger than the buildings on either side of it. It was set back a few yards from the road behind a forecourt where there was room to park at least a dozen cars, and its delivery doors were open. The forecourt was empty but a light appeared to be on inside, the only light I'd seen in a building on the whole estate.

I felt the hairs prickle on the back of my neck like it was being stroked by a poltergeist. Something was wrong with this whole thing. Very wrong. I pushed back in my seat, feeling the comforting closeness of the Clock rubbing against the small of my back, confident that if I had to use it then at least I knew it would fire.

This is it, the one with the light on. That's where we're meeting.'

'What time's it set for again?' I asked.

Ten thirty.'

I looked at my watch. Ten past. 'Better early than late, I suppose.'

Eric slowed the car and turned into the forecourt, watching for any signs of activity.

But there were none. No movement, no voices, no nothing. The place was as deserted as a cemetery.

Eric brought the Range Rover to a halt outside the delivery doors.

'Well, someone's been here tonight,' I said.

'It doesn't look like they're here now,' said Eric, peering inside.

There was a growing tension in the car. You could almost smell it.

'You definitely got the time right?' I said.

'Course I did/ snapped Fowler, who looked the most nervous of any oif us by a long chalk. 'It's still early, remember?' He leant forward in his seat and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. His left leg was shaking uncontrollably and, for some reason, I found myself enjoying his discomfort.

'Maybe we should drive in there and take a look around/ said Tony, also leaning forward. What do you think, Max? We could take up positions so we're ready when they get here.'

It seemed as good an idea as any. 'Yeah, let's do that. It can't do any harm.' Which was a statement I was to remember for the rest of my days.

Eric touched the accelerator and we drove in through the gap in the doors.

The place was about twenty yards deep by ten yards wide, and empty aside from a row of ancient looking oil drums which stood a few feet in front of a door in the far right-hand corner. Above the door was a long balcony that stretched the width of the room and overlooked the front of the car. A number of unmarked boxes were positioned along it, some of them stacked two or three high. I looked up at them for any sign of activity, but everything was still. As still as the grave, as my grandma used to say before she was lowered into her own.

The Range Rover stopped in the middle of the floor. Eric put it into neutral and pulled up the handbrake. He too looked up at the boxes. 'Perfect place for an ambush/ he said quietly, almost to himself. 'Saw something like this back in Ulster.'

'Look, this is just a fucking meeting/ said Fowler impatiently. 'Nothing more. All right?'

'It was while we were based out of Londonderry. The RUC got a call from some woman, said she'd been raped out by this disused old factory. This was in the old days, way back at the beginning of the seventies, before they'd got wise to the way the provos worked. The Officials were still around then and they tended to play it more by the book. Anyway, they despatched a car with three RUC men in it to pick her up, and an ambulance as well. Just in case. She'd made the call from a phone box outside the factory gates, but when the car got there, they saw her wandering about inside the grounds, you know, all distraught and that.'

The car fell silent. All you could hear was Fowler's heavy breathing in the back.

'So they drove in through the gates and went down to pick her up. She saw them, started crying hysterically, and ran off into the building, like she couldn't come to terms with getting near any men so soon after what'd happened. The RUC car stopped in front of it and the coppers, all blokes, went to get out. None of them drew their guns, they didn't want to unnerve her, and I don't think the poor bastards ever suspected a thing.

'They never even got their feet on the ground. A couple of provo gunmen stuck their Armalites out of the windows on the second floor, right above the car, and started shooting on fully automatic. The driver was killed outright.'

'What about the one in the front seat passenger side?' I asked.

'If I remember rightly, he died later in hospital.'

'Great. That's a real rucking help, that is.'

'Fucking hell, Eric,' snorted Tony. 'Take us all feel better, why don't you?'

'I wouldn't worry too much, Tone. Or you,' Eric added, meaning Fowler. The one in the back survived. Got hit in the neck but the bullet passed straight through. Didn't touch a single one of his main cables. Far as I know the bloke's still alive.'

'Stop joking around, and keep your wits about you,' hissed Fowler. 'That's what I'm paying you for.'

Eric's face clouded over. He didn't like taking shit from anyone, even paying customers. 'You know, Max, I'm beginning to think this job's worth a lot more than what I'm getting for it.'

'Life's an underpaid occupation, Eric,' I told him.

'Everyone knows that.' I looked at my watch again.
10.14- 'I'm going to take a look around.'

Fowler leant forward abruptly. 'I don't think that's a good idea, Mr Iversson. It's best we stick together and wait for them to come.'

'I won't go far. I just want to check things out.'

'Look, I insist...'

I stepped out of the car, ignoring his pleas. I'm pretty good with the punters usually, to tell you the truth, but it wasn't as if I was going to get any repeat business from this prick, plus I already had the money, so basically there was no need to play along with him. Particularly when it was so obvious that there was a lot more to this meeting than he was letting on. Fucking people around was, .. same two could play.

I stretched my legs, then walked casually towards the door in the far corner, keeping one eye on the boxes overhead. Eric's story had given me the spooks a lot more than I'd ordinarily like to admit. It seemed to have done the same to him too because he stepped out of the car and leant back against the bonnet, lighting another cigarette and watching the boxes like a hawk.

I reached the door and tried it. Locked. So, who the hell had come here and switched the lights on? And where were they now? I turned back towards the car.

Eric looked across at me. 'Nothing?'

I shook my head. 'Locked.' I walked across to the open doors and stepped outside into the warm breeze. Over on the horizon the distant lights of the West End glowed pink. The road was quiet and I

listened hard for any sound of a car coming; through the estate, but there was nothing but the distant rumble of traffic. Maybe they just liked to be fashionably late.

It was 10.16 and I was edgy. I decided to go back and question Fowler in a little more detail about exactly what was in that briefcase of his, the one he'd been so reluctant to bring into the warehouse.

I turned round.

In the car, Roy Fowler was still fretting as he waited to get everything over and done with. Ten more minutes, he kept telling himself. Just ten more minutes, and he'd be a rich man.

Tony gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. 'Look, Mr Fowler, calm down. It's going to be OK.'

Fowler exhaled heavily and turned to Tony. His face was taut with tension. 'I'm all right. I just wish they'd get here, that's all.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' said Tony encouragingly. 'They're already here.' He motioned towards the front doors where Iversson stood with his back to them.

Fowler wriggled round in his seat and looked out of the rear window. 'Where?'

'Here,' said Tony, and pushed the silencer hard against Fowler's head, just in front of his ear.

Before Fowler even had a chance to react, Tony pulled the trigger. Fowler let out a sharp sigh and the passenger window behind him cracked as the bullet passed through it. He slumped in the seat, and rolled round so he was facing his killer, allowing Tony to press the weapon against his forehead and give him one more, just for good measure.

The front driver's door opened and Eric, having heard the noise of breaking glass, shoved his head in, completely unaware of what had just happened. He spotted Fowler immediately, dead in his seat, blood dripping from his face in thin rivulets and onto his sweat-stained shirt.

'What the fuck's going on?' he demanded.

'I shot him/ said Tony, pulling the gun up from his jacket and aiming it at his colleague's face. Eric's eyes widened and his body tensed as he tried to come to terms with the sight in front of him.

'Tony, don't do--'

Tony fired twice, both bullets striking Eric in the face. The big man staggered backwards, and Tony leant forward to fire two more shots into his upper body. His legs buckled and went from under him, and he fell heavily to the ground, moaning and clutching wildly at his face and chest.

Tony, meanwhile, threw open the car door and came out looking for the man who until two minutes ago had been his boss.

I was still in the process of turning round as Roy Fowler died. It took a couple of seconds to take in the muffled noises and the movement in the back of the Range Rover, by which time Eric was turning round, still holding onto his cigarette, and hurriedly pulling open the door. I took a step forward as Eric said something to Tony, then a series of popping sounds came from inside the car and Eric's head snapped back and he lost his footing, stumbling like a drunk man. I knew immediately that he'd been shot, but still

not by whom. It didn't make sense. I stopped dead in my tracks, confused by the sudden turn of events, and fumbled in the back of my waistband for the gun.

At the same time, Tony stepped almost casually out of the car, gun in hand, and turned towards me. He raised the weapon, that eerie little half-smile flickering across his face, and prepared to fire. For some reason, the first thought that crossed my mind was how rucking annoying that look was. It made the bastard appear really cocky, which was something I'd never noticed before. The second thought I had was that I'd always liked Tony.

Then my military training took over and I hit the deck, rolling over and pulling out the Clock. The silencer spat twice as Tony came forward, closing in for the kill, and bullets hissed quietly through the air, ricocheting up from the concrete, feet from where I was rolling.

Tony came round the back of the Range Rover, taking aim again, but this time it was his turn for a shock. Without warning, I stopped rolling and leapt to my feet, locating and flicking off the safety in what was close to a reflex action. His face froze in disbelief like he couldn't believe I'd be so cheeky as to pull a gun on him, and then I was firing, the bullets exploding round the enclosed space of the warehouse in an angry cluster of noise. Tony pulled the trigger too, and I felt a bullet whistle past my left ear, but time was moving so fast that I didn't even think about it, just kept firing, two handed, concentrating on keeping the weapon level, emptying the magazine.

Tony stumbled back as he was hit in the shoulder of his gun arm. A second round struck him in the throat, then a third in the face, knocking him sideways. The next thing I knew, he was falling to the floor, the gun flying out of his grip and clattering out of reach. Immediately, he tried to lift himself up, his face registering another look of disbelief as he realized he was dying. Blood so dark it was almost black poured from the wounds on his face and throat, turning his white polo shirt a deepening horror-film colour. He held the position with his head a foot above the floor for about three seconds, then fell backwards with a thud, choking heavily.

I walked over to him, still gripping the Clock hard. He rolled himself into a ball, coughing and retching as his mouth filled with blood. Well, one thing was for sure: I wasn't going to get any answers out of him now. Once in Africa, a long time back, I'd seen a man take a bullet in the throat. It had taken him close to ten minutes to die, choking and gasping on his own blood. There was nothing that could have been done. As soon as the bullet had struck him the outcome was inevitable. It was inevitable now, but I didn't think I could just let it happen. Like I said, I'd always liked Tony.

I ejected the magazine and checked the bullets. There were three left. Pushing it back in, I leant down, chambered a round, and pulled the trigger, blowing Tony's brains across the dirty floor. The body juddered a couple of times, then lay still.

I stopped for a moment, looking about the warehouse and listening for any suspicious sounds. Nothing, bar the faint sound of light breathing

coming from Eric. I walked over to him, bolstered the gun, and knelt down. He was lying on his back, his hands laid across his chest in full funeral style.

His face was twisted and bloody with the entry wounds of Tony's bullets clearly visible. One was just below his right eye, the other on his lower left cheek, an inch above the jawline. A dark red pool was forming on the floor beneath his head and his eyes were shut. I felt his neck for a pulse. There was something there but it was very faint; and, even as I held my finger on it, it faded away until it was gone altogether.

Eric. He'd been a good man. Reliable, professional, all the things you wanted in business.

Not someone you could take liberties with, not someone who was afraid of using force when it was necessary, but nevertheless someone whose heart was in the right place. The poor sod had even bought me a bottle of whisky the previous Christmas, which might have been a small gesture but was the sort I appreciated. It made me feel guilty that I'd only intended to pay him three hundred quid for the night's work. It didn't seem a lot to die for.

I stood up, wondering what the fuck had gone wrong and how we could have been betrayed so completely. Eric had three kids, all grown up, and four grandkids too. But he was also long since divorced. This meant that it was unlikely anyone close to him would know where he was that night. I was in a difficult position. If I went to the law and told them what had happened, I'd be leaving myself open to all kinds of questions, particularly regarding

the shooting of Tony, and the unlicensed firearm I'd been carrying. I could end up going down for years if my story wasn't believed, and, to be honest, who would believe it? The alternatives, it has to be said, were almost as bad. Drive out of there in a damaged vehicle registered in my own name and leave behind three bodies in the hope that no-one would ever connect them to me. Or hide the bodies somewhere and deprive Eric of a proper burial. That was, of course, on the basis that they remained hidden.

It was at times like this that I needed a cigarette. It wouldn't have done a blind bit of good but somehow smoking had always helped me think straight. I tried to fathom out what Tony's plan had been. Kill us all and get rid of the corpses, I assumed. Then what? Joe knew that he'd been there with us so he could hardly just walk around as if nothing had happened. Perhaps he'd had plans to disappear. But that still didn't help to supply any sort of motive.

One thing, however, was certain. This wasn't something he could have put together on his own, and whoever else was involved might well be in the vicinity. I decided that by hanging around I was putting myself in needless danger.

I went round to the rear passenger side of the Range Rover and opened the door. Fowler's crumpled body tumbled out, landing in an ungainly heap on the floor. He was very definitely dead, and, if he hadn't been, I'd have killed the bastard myself. Whatever else might have been a mystery, I was pretty damned sure that Fowler had been the architect of his own demise. A slimy

bastard like that was always going to make enemies.

I thought about moving the body somewhere less conspicuous, but without gloves it wasn't an option. I was just going to have to leave all three of them there and front it out. It was the only thing I could do, at least for the moment. Maybe Joe would have some ideas.

The damage to the car was superficial: two small holes in the window, surrounded by spider-web cracks. I could knock the whole thing out and replace it easily enough. Fowler had bled inside a little bit but not as badly as might have been expected.

I shut the door, went round switching off all the lights, then walked back round to the driver's side. The keys were still in the ignition so I got in and backed out of the warehouse, before dragging the two doors shut and hoping above hope that no-one opened them again for a long, long time.

Now there was only one thing left to do. I jumped back in the car and drove slowly down the road, following the route we'd come in on, until I got to the bush in front of Canley Electronics where Fowler had hidden the briefcase. I stopped the car and, leaving the engine running, jumped out. This was one mystery I could at least solve. I paused for a moment and listened. Still no sound, bar the continued hum of city traffic and the odd call of a night bird. High in the sky a three-quarter moon stared impassively down, unmoved by the events below.

I jogged up to the bush and knelt down where Fowler had been only minutes earlier, then reached

into the foliage and felt about, knowing that I was in the right place because I'd been careful to watch him earlier.

My hand touched something solid. A handle. Bingo. I pulled it out, feeling an irrational excitement. I had to know what was so important that men I knew, men I liked, had had to die for it. I stood up, located the two catches on either side of tin.- handle, and went to press them.

Which was when I heard the sound: a scrape of a shoe on gravel behind one of the two parked cars in front of the Canley Electronics building, only ten yards away. I thought I saw something move. I looked more closely, feeling myself tense. And then I saw him, a man in dark clothing and a baseball cap, face obscured by a scarf, moving about in the shadows. Those were the only details I can remember. I was too busy looking at the rifle nestled against his shoulder, the rifle that was now pointing straight at my head.

There was a hiss as a bullet flew above me, almost parting my hair, and struck something behind with a metallic clang. Immediately, I ducked down behind the hedge and ran, crouching, round to the driver's side of the car as more rounds spat through the air. As I pulled open the door, I chucked the briefcase into the passenger seat, accidentally biting my tongue as a bullet passed right through the car and out the open driver's-side window before ricocheting off the wing mirror. I ripped the Clock out of my waistband and cracked off my last two shots at him as he came round the front of the hedge and into view.

I was sure they'd both missed their target but they forced him to dive behind the bush and temporarily out of sight. Without waiting for him to reappear, I jumped into the car, rammed it into gear, and drove out of there as fast as I could, not bothering to look round or stop when I came to the barrier. I hit it full-on, broke it in two, and carried on going.

I reckon I'd only gone a matter of a few hundred yards when the intense curiosity I was feeling got the better of me. Even though I could hear the sound of sirens closing in in the distance, even though I knew I was taking a huge and needless risk, I couldn't resist pulling over and picking up the briefcase. Once again, I located the catches and this time got the opportunity to press them. They both clicked satisfyingly and the case came open.

I stared for maybe three, four seconds, feeling confused, unable to fully comprehend what I was seeing.

Because, you see, after all that, the fucking thing was empty.

Gallan

The murder of Shaun Matthews, thirty-one, of the i'riory Green Estate in Islington was an odd one from the start. Matthews had enemies, there was no doubt about that. Three months before his death he'd been threatened by two men he'd thrown out of the Arcadia nightclub in Holloway where he worked as chief doorman. One of the two, later identified as twenty-eight-year-old Carl Voen, had claimed that he was going to come back and blow Matthews's head off. This might not have been taken seriously had it not been for the fact that Voen had a previous conviction for possession of a firearm and two further convictions for grievous bodily harm. He was, by most accounts, a man with a short fuse. He was also, unfortunately, a man with a watertight alibi for the time of death. For at least twelve hours either side of the point at which Matthews had shuffled off his mortal coil, he'd been in custody undergoing questioning about an armed robbery, with the questioning being carried

out by two of the detectives who were now investigating the murder.

Shaun Matthews was also a drug dealer.

According to anecdotal evidence collated by investigating officers, he supplied Ecstasy, cocaine and, on at least one occasion, heroin to Arcadia clubgoers (apparently in collusion with the club's management), as well as to individuals visiting his flat. According to more than one source, he had also earned himself something of a reputation for selling below-par products, particularly when operating off the premises. There was a story doing the rounds that one unlucky punter had challenged Matthews about an especially poor batch of cannabis he'd sold him only to have Matthews dangle him by the ankle from the third-floor balcony of his flat while simultaneously slashing his buttocks with a Stanley knife. The punter had needed more than forty stitches on his behind and he, too, had left the hospital muttering words of dark revenge against the man who'd made it so difficult for him to sit down in comfort for months to come.

Nothing about any of this was odd, of course.

There are plenty of criminals out there who fail to recognize or abide by even the most rudimentary facets of capitalism, and insist on riding roughshod over their customers and making enemies as casually as old ladies make cups of tea. Sometimes, inevitably, they end up dead, and usually the people doing the killing are those they've wronged, but in Matthews's case there appeared to be more to matters than initially met the eye.

For a start, it had taken two days to conclude that he'd been murdered. Matthews was what a tabloid report might describe as a 'strapping' young man: six feet two, sixteen stone of mainly muscle, very fit (at least superficially) as a result of his daily visits to the gym, and no history of medical problems. Therefore when he was found dead in his bed one morning by police officers who'd been called by a colleague from the Arcadia who was concerned that he hadn't turned up at work two evenings running, it came as something of a shock to all concerned. Not, perhaps, that he was dead but more that there didn't appear to be any obvious cause. There were no external injuries and no sign of any kind of a struggle. Matthews was lying on his back, with the covers half off him, and his head tilted to one side. The expression on his face was what the first officer on the scene had described as restful. Not fearful, angry, or even shocked. Just restful. His arms were stretched out to his sides with the fists lightly clenched, and he was naked. It looked like death by natural causes, or possibly some sort of drugs overdose.

Matthews's body was taken away for a postmortem, and this was when things got interesting. For all his strength and build, in actual fact he probably didn't have long to live. He had a serious heart condition, thought to have been brought on by an addiction to steroids. There were traces of nandralone in his blood, as well as cocaine and alcohol, and injection marks on his left arm. Initially, the pathologist thought that he'd had a heart attack, but unfortunately such a diagnosis

didn't explain the strange internal injuries Matthews had suffered. There'd been extensive internal haemorrhaging as well as a cloudy swelling in the cells of a number of organs, particularly the kidneys. Somewhat baffled, the pathologist had carried out further tests. These showed significant traces of an extremely potent neurotoxin that would have resulted in these injuries and were, almost certainly, the cause of death. And this was the thing. The poisons department at Guy's Hospital were called in and quickly identified the neurotoxin as elipadae, or cobra, venom.

Snake poison. Hardly the work of your average lowlife thug, the type Shaun Matthews specialized in upsetting. Which left what? The neighbours all agreed that Matthews received a fair number of visitors which, given his alleged trade, wasn't particularly surprising, and it was felt that one of them was the likely perpetrator. Where your average small-time drugs buyer was likely to have got hold of cobra venom, however, was anyone's guess.

The case was an odd one, and as far as I was concerned odd equalled interesting, and interesting equalled challenging, which these days can be something of a rarity. Never underestimate the stupidity of criminals. Most of them'll make every effort imaginable to get caught. In the last murder investigation I'd been involved in, ten weeks earlier, the murderer, a seventeen-year-old car jacker named Rudi, had stabbed an unfortunate BMW owner to death when he'd had the gall to try to prevent his car being taken. Rudi had been

arrested three days afterwards when a passing patrol car had spotted the vehicle parked outside his mum's flat. Further investigation had unearthed Rudi's prints all over the interior, as well as those of two of his mates. The knife he'd used, still complete with somewhat telltale bloodstains, had turned up under his bed hidden in a PlayStation box. I reckon the paperwork took up more time than the detective work. Sherlock Holmes wouldn't even have bothered getting out of bed, and who could blame him?

But this was different. A poisoning opened up all sorts of possibilities. It suggested interesting motives. It suggested intelligence, or at least creativity, on the part of the poisoner, but also an >::credible naivety. Poisoning was, in general, a pretty foolish method of committing murder. It was too easily traceable these days which meant its one great advantage - that it could make the victim's death look like an accident - no longer held true. Having said this, however, the case was now six days old (or at least the murder was) and had yet to throw up any real clues of note, or anything that pointed to one particular person.

It was a fine sunny morning, the fifth day of what passes for an English heatwave, and DC Dave Berrin was driving as we pulled into the walled car park at the rear of the Arcadia nightclub, an imposing post-war structure on the Upper Holloway Road which dominated the corner on which it stood, and parked in a bay marked STAFF ONLY.

Not surprisingly, the club was closed at this time in the morning, but we were expected and walked

right in through the double doors at the front. The interior was dark and spacious with tables facing down on to the dance floor on three sides. At the opposite end of the room was a long bar lined with stools. A woman stood on the serving side of it with a pen in her hand, looking down at some papers in front of her. She appeared to be the only person in the place. She looked up when she heard our footfalls on the wooden floor.

'Sorry, we're closed,' she shouted out, going back to her papers. 'We open at twelve for lunch.'

'We're police officers,' I said loudly, crossing the dance floor with Benin in tow. 'Here to see Mr Fowler.'

'He's not here/ she shouted back.

'He should be. He's expecting us. We've got an eleven o'clock meeting.'

'Well, he's not here.'

I strode up the steps to the bar and stopped in front of her. She carried on making notes on the papers on the bar. 'Perhaps, then, you can tell us where he is.'

She looked up with a faintly bored expression on her face. 'I don't know. He should have been here more than an hour ago.'

This one had an attitude, all right. I gave her a quick once-over. Early thirties, slim with well defined features, a nose that was maybe a little too sharp, and a vaguely Mediterranean appearance, particularly the olive-coloured eyes. She was definitely attractive - very attractive - but in a hard, don't-mess-with-me kind of way, with the cynical confidence of someone who's not afraid of a fight.

If we'd been Nazi stormtroopers, we wouldn't have intimidated her. My ex-wife's all-time favourite film is *Gone with the Wind* and I think that says something about her (though I'm not quite sure what). This girl looked like hers was *Scarface*.

'Is he likely to be at home?' I asked her.

'I told you, I don't know where he is.'

I sighed ostentatiously. 'But I presume you've got j,,v home phone number?' She nodded. 'Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd phone him then and tell him we're here.'

'Look, I'm very busy.' She motioned to the notes in front of her.

'So are we, Miss ... ?'

'Toms. Elaine Toms. I talked to a couple of your ui.ics_rt> the other day.'

'Well, we're very busy too and it would be greatly appreciated if you could phone Mr Fowler and see if he's at home for us. It won't take a minute.'

My tone was even but firm, the kind that says I'm going to keep going until I get some co-operation. It always works in the end, but you'd be amazed how many people take a long time getting the message.

Without a word she turned and walked over to a telephone pinned to the wall in the corner, and dialled a number. I was a bit pissed off because I'd been preparing for this interview for close to a day now. We'd talked to Fowler once but only briefly to ascertain his position within the nightclub, what his relationship was with the deceased, and whether he could throw any light on what had happened. He'd come across as very keen to appear as helpful and

as friendly as possible, but hadn't actually managed to tell us a great deal. Predictably, he'd denied knowing anything about Matthews's involvement in drug dealing. He'd claimed that as Arcadia's owner he didn't tolerate drug use on the premises but was aware that it did occur. 'I'm looking at ways to combat it,' he'd said, and had talked about installing cameras in the toilets. That's where most of it goes on, I'm sure/ he'd added - a fairly logical assumption. Neither Berrin nor I had found the interview very helpful, mainly because there was something not quite authentic about Fowler's answers, and since then it had come to light that he had a conviction for conspiracy to supply Class A drugs in the late 1980s and that one of his co-conspirators at the time had been Terry Holtz, the late brother of a notorious local crime figure. He'd also been done for driving under the influence of cannabis a couple of years back, and the club had been raided on two separate occasions by the Drugs Squad in an effort to take out suspected dealers, the last time eighteen months ago, although it had to be said that on neither occasion was any contraband found. More promisingly, there was also a rumour doing the rounds that, although Fowler's name was on the deeds of the club, he wasn't what you'd call the real owner. That man, it was claimed, was one Stefan Holtz, the same local crime figure whose brother Fowler had once been involved with.

The feeling in the station's CID was that the motive for this murder was almost certainly drug related and that it might possibly be something to

do with a disagreement between Fowler and Matthews. Since Fowler apparently owned the club, and was almost certainly lying when he said he didn't tolerate drugs on the premises, and Matthews appeared to have been the chief dealer, it was probably down to an argument about something mundane like the split of profits. All this was conjecture, of course, but DCI Knox, the head of the investigation, specialized in conjecture. Me, though, I wasn't so sure, not least because I didn't think Fowler would have used an obscure poison to rid himself of a troublesome business partner. But I did think there were plenty of questions he could provide an answer for, particularly regarding the possible involvement of the Holtzes, and I was keen to hear them.

But it seemed I was going to have to wait a little longer.

'He's not there,' said Elaine Toms, coming back to the papers on the bar. 'Either that or he's not answering.'

'Have you got his address?' She nodded, and wrote it down on a piece of paper. I took it, thanking her, and put it in my pocket. It was local. 'And what's your position here, Miss Toms?'

'I told you, I've already been interviewed about the murder.'

'Well, we're talking to you again. I'd just like to refresh myself of your account.'

'It was a DID talked to.'

'DI Capper. Yes, I know. Now, if you'll answer the questions.'

'Have you got any ID?'

She was trying to be difficult but I wasn't going to argue about it, so I took out my warrant card and showed it to her, as did Benin. She inspected them both carefully, paying particular attention to mine. 'It's not a very good photo of you,' she told me.

'With me, the camera always lies,' I said. 'Now, your position?'

'I manage the place.'

'And how long have you been here for?'

'Just over a year. I joined last July.'

'You knew Shaun Matthews pretty well, then?'

She sighed theatrically. 'Yeah, I knew Shaun Matthews pretty well. You know, I've said all this before.'

'Humour me. I presume you knew he dealt drugs?'

'Are you asking me or telling me?'

'I'm asking you.'

She shrugged. 'I heard that he did some dealing here and there and that he might even have done some in this place, but I never saw him do any and I never saw anyone else take any stuff either. Occasionally you get someone off their face, but if they get like that we don't serve them and we chuck them out. They're certainly not sold the stuff in here. I only heard Shaun was meant to be this big-time dealer after he died.'

'You're sticking to the party line, then? That Arcadia's pretty much drug free and that you don't go in for that sort of thing here.'

She glared at me. 'We don't. Now, if you've finished...'

'Does Stefan Holtz own this place?'

Who?'

'Stefan Holtz. You must have heard of him.' She shook her head. 'He's a well-known local businessman, to use the term very loosely.'

'Look, as far as I'm concerned, Roy Fowler owns this place. That's who hired me and that's who pays me.'

'Are you sure the name Stefan Holtz means nothing to you?' asked Benin.

'Oh, it speaks,' she said with a smirk.

Benin looked slightly embarrassed. 'Just answer the question/ he persisted, trying not to be intimidated by her, but not making a particularly good job of it.

She slowly turned her head, faced him down, u,uk a breath, then spoke. 'Tes, I'm sure.' She turned back to me. 'I don't know a Stefan Holtz.'

'Mr Fowler was going to get us a list of casual door staff who've worked here over the past six months/ I continued, 'but so far we haven't received it.'

'Oh dear/ she said with a cheeky half-smile.

Tou're the manager/ said Benin. 'Can you provide us with that information?'

The smile disappeared rapidly. 'I haven't got time. You'll need to speak to Mr Fowler about it.'

'We would do if he was here/1 said, thinking that this was one of the great problems with policework. That most of the time you were constantly trying to get blood out of a stone. Just tell us the name of the company who supplies the doormen, then/ I added, not wanting to waste any more time with

Elaine Toms, 'and we'll contact them.'

She paused, and the reason she paused was simple. If there were any dodgy ownership issues, then they would spread to the company who supplied the doormen because with nightclubs that's how things work. She wouldn't want to give out the information but I knew she couldn't lie about it either, in case Fowler had already given us the name and I was just testing her.

'It's an outfit called Elite A,' she said eventually. Benin wrote the name down. 'But I don't know how much they'll be able to tell you. I don't think they're too hot on the paperwork front.'

'What makes you say that?'

'You know what these security firms are like. They use freelancers/

'Did Shaun Matthews come via Elite A?'

'I think so, originally, but it was before my time so I couldn't say for sure. The papers said something about him being poisoned/

"That's what we believe/

She shook her head as if she couldn't comprehend such an end for him. 'What's the world coming to, eh?'

To the same place it's always been, Miss Toms. Full of not very nice people doing not very nice things to each other.' I resisted adding that with Shaun Matthews's demise there was at least one fewer of them. 'If you hear from Mr Fowler, please ask him to get in touch with us immediately/

She took the card I gave her with my number on it. 'So, have you got any suspects?'

'We're working on a number of leads,' I answered, using the stock detective's line which

Was basically a euphemism for 'No', and she obviously recognized it for what it was because she turned away with another of those half-smiles. The discussion was over.

When we were back in the car, Benin turned to me with an expression of concern. 'I don't think I did too well in there,' he said. 'You handled it a lot better than me.'

o < jii in's young, he's a graduate, and, like most of us, he's still got a lot to learn. Unlike most of us, he recognizes it, and it means he's not as confident as he could be. He'd only been promoted out of uniform three months earlier, and apart from Rudi, the casual killer and carjacker, this was his first ii,urdc case. It was also the first time we'd worked together.

I shrugged. 'I've been in the game a lot longer, which makes it a lot easier to handle people like her. Remember, you're the one who's the boss. With the cocky ones it can be easy to forget.'

He nodded thoughtfully. At that moment, he reminded me of a contestant from that TV programme *Faking It*. One month to turn a good looking Home Counties college boy into a Met detective. He was working hard to master the ropes, to make a good impression, but he didn't look a natural.

He turned to me, the concern replaced by determined zeal, the kind you sometimes see on the faces of door-to-door missionaries. 'I let her get me on the wrong foot. That was the problem. I didn't do enough to make her show me respect. It won't happen again.'

I know it won't/ I said, patting him on the shoulder. 'Tou work with me, you'll be Dirty Harry in no time.'

He pulled out of the parking space. 'Teah, right.'

Roy Fowler lived in a modern, showy-looking development complex near Finsbury Park. It's what these days they like to call a gated community, although there usually tends to be very little community-wise about them. We were stopped at the main gates by a uniformed doorman who was well past retirement age and looked like he'd have trouble stopping a runaway skateboard let alone a shadowy intruder. We showed him our credentials and were waved into the car park in front of the five six-storey buildings that were arranged in a semi-circle around the well-kept, if rather dull, communal gardens. Fowler lived in apartment number 12 which was in the second building on the left.

But if he wasn't at work, he wasn't at home either. We buzzed on his intercom for several minutes but didn't get an answer. I phoned the Arcadia and double-checked the address with Elaine Toms. It was the right one. Fowler still hadn't turned up at the club either, a fact that was beginning to irritate me and her.

We sat in the car and waited for ten minutes without result, then decided to make our way back to the station. It had been an unproductive morning and Benin was beginning to look depressed, as if it had only just dawned on him that life in CID was a lot less interesting than it looked on the telly.

It was as we were coming out of Fowler's complex that I saw it. A dark blue Range Rover driving by just in front of us. It only passed our field of vision for a couple of seconds at most but I noticed straight away that it had holes in the paintwork and industrial taping over two of the windows. It kept going and I memorized the number plate as Berrin pulled out, heading f]ir other way.

'Did you see that car?' I asked him.

Berrin is not the most observant man in the world. 'What car?' was his reply.

I thought about it for a few seconds. Who'd be daft enough to be driving around in a bullet-ridden Range Rover in broad daylight? But those holes cLJii'l look like they'd been made by anything else - what else could have made them? - and, as I've said before, you should never underestimate the stupidity of criminals. It was probably wasting someone's time but I took my mobile from my pocket and phoned the station to report a suspicious vehicle, giving its location and possible route.

'Do you want to turn round and go after it?' said Berrin, looking like his depression was lifting.

'It's probably nothing. Let's leave it for the uniforms. I need to get something to eat.'

'What do you think? Do you reckon he's flown the coop?'

The loud, confident voice belonged to DCI Knox, the big boss. No question of him ever losing control of an interview. Berrin and I were sat in his office,

on the other side of his imposing desk, explaining the position regarding the lack of intelligence as to Roy Fowler's whereabouts.

We don't know/ said Benin. 'He was certainly aware that we were meant to interview him this morning.'

It seems odd, though,' I said, liim disappearing off so soon. If s like an admission of guilt, but, if we're honest, we haven't really got anything on him.'

Knox nodded in his sage-like way. True. But then where is he?'

It was a good question. Tvlaybe he had more pressing engagements and thought we could wait/ I said eventually.

Knox snorted. Well, he's wrong if he thinks that. We'll put out an alert. Any patrol that sees him, they can pick him up and bring him in for questioning. I don't like the way these smalltime villains think they're royalty these days.'

We both nodded in general agreement. It was always good to agree with Knox, always fatal to pick holes in his pronouncements. Unlike Benin, he was not one of life's listeners, whatever he liked to claim. 'My door's always open' was one of his favourite mantras, which might have been true literally, but that was about it.

'What about the list of bouncers? I don't suppose we've got that then, have we?'

I shook my head. 'No. We spoke to the manager, a Miss Toms, and she told us that a company called Elite A supplied all the casual door staff they used.'

'I wonder if she's involved in the drugs scene at the Arcadia/ mused Knox.

'Has she got a record?'

He shook his head. 'I don't think so, but that doesn't mean anything, does it? There was definitely dealing going on down there and it's almost certain that it originated on the door. So the manager's probably in on it. You'll need to check up on this Elite A. I don't suppose whoever runs them's whiter than white.' Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Benin nodding in agreement. Cheeky sod. A politician already. 'Now,' continued Knox, 'we've talked to three of the other doormen at Arcadia who all worked there on a permanent basis, so we only really need to catch up with the temporaries who've been there the last six months, dluiohough that could be quite a few. They're a busy club. I'll leave you two to do that. Try to get to talk to them all by Monday p.m. at the latest. We need to tie up all the loose ends on this.'

'And these other doormen haven't told us anything useful?'

'No. They all knew Shaun Matthews to varying degrees but none said they'd ever seen him selling drugs of any description and, of course, they all denied selling any themselves. When confronted by witness statements testifying to his extracurricular activities, they all expressed varying degrees of surprise/

'Perhaps we should offer some sort of reward,' I suggested. That might persuade them to give us some information we could use.'

'It's a possibility if we still don't get anywhere, but budgets are tight and I'm not sure I'd feel right doling out much-needed money to solve the

murder of a violent drug dealer.' Once again, I caught Benin nodding.

'It might get us a result.'

'We'll have to see. We've got pretty much our whole allocation resting on the Robert Jones case. If we have to pay out on that then we're not going to be able to offer a reward on anything until 2010.'

I baulked at the mention of Robert Jones. Always did. It was one of the few cases that had truly disturbed me in all my time in the Met. Robert was a thirteen-year-old schoolboy who'd disappeared while doing his morning paper round six months earlier. His body had been found a few days afterwards buried in a shallow grave in woodland out in Essex. He'd been stabbed three times in the chest and his clothing had been tampered with, indicating some sort of sexual assault. I'd had to break the news of the discovery to the parents, along with the WPC who'd been their liaison officer. They'd been a pleasant, ordinary middle-class couple who'd only let Robert do the round because he'd been keen to save up enough money to buy a new bike. I'd watched, unable to do anything to help, as they'd crumbled in front of me, while the WPC had comforted his little sister when she'd appeared in the doorway, too young to understand what was going on. Robert had been their only son, his family's pride and joy. What had got me the most was the total and utter injustice of it all. A young boy from a good home, never been in trouble unlike so many of the little bastards we had to deal with - seeking to better himself, only to be struck down in the space of a few moments by someone

who probably had no idea of the terrible damage he was inflicting. It was such a waste and, six months on/ we were no nearer bringing the killer to justice, even though a reward of twenty-five thousand pounds had been offered for information leading to a conviction: fifteen thousand from the police and ten thousand from a local businessman. Unlike Robert Jones, his killer had had all the luck.

'What about the poisoning angle?' I asked. 'Any more news on that?'

Knox furrowed his brow into deep, craggy lines. 'Well, it's coming along/ he said without a huge amount of conviction. 'WDC Boyd's been liaising with the poisons department at Guy's and doctors from the Home Office about this substance and its possible source, as you know, but I'm not sure how much help it is. I mean, it's not as if you can pop into the pharmacy, pick some of this stuff up, and sign the Poisons Register. It's cobra venom, for God's sake.'

'So there's no place you could get it in this country?'

Knox shook his head. 'Not officially, no. As far as anyone seems to know, the only place you can find it is in the mouth, or whatever, of the cobra. And as far as I'm aware, none of them lives within five thousand miles of here. You'll have to talk to Boyd about all that, though. She's now our resident toxins expert. The thing is, I don't know how much help either she or anyone else can be. We haven't got a clue where you actually get it from in a usable format, where this particular batch may have originated, or anything like that. All we know is

that somehow someone came into possession of enough of the stuff to kill three people, and somehow got the opportunity to inject the whole lot into the left arm of a sixteen-stone bouncer without him noticing, or getting any sort of opportunity to seek medical help.'

DC Benin exhaled slowly and thoughtfully. 'It's a mystery/ he said. A statement of the obvious if ever there was one, but which pretty much j| summed things up.

Iversson

The lunchtime traffic was heavy and I was paranoid. Not surprising when you're driving at speeds a two-legged dog could muster in a car that looks like it's been used in an Arnie Schwarzenegger film, even down to the bloodstains on the back seat, and you know that most of the bullets wedged in the exterior were meant for you. But what choice did I have? The Range Rover was registered in my name and I needed to stash it somewhere where it was not going to receive undue attention. I was therefore on my way now to the abode of one Gary Tyler, a bloke who did occasional work for us, and who had the invaluable asset of a lock-up over in Silvertown that I could use for storage purposes until I worked out what to do. I looked at my watch. It was five to one. What a twenty-four hours. There'd been no news on the shootings the

previous night. Not a dickie bird. Whoever had organized our little warehouse reception - and some bastard most definitely had - was as efficient as he was ruthless. Three bodies left behind in an industrial estate in the heart of north London amid a load of gunfire, and not a peep about it in the press or on the TV, and I'd checked enough times (hat day. When I'd spoken to my partner Joe Riggs on the blower earlier, he'd been shocked (although not half as shocked as I'd been when one of our most reliable employees had started taking potshots at me), and it was only when he'd asked me whether I'd managed to pick up the money in advance that I knew the tight bastard was all right. L; the end, we'd decided not to say anything about Eric's death. It was unfair to the family, no-one was denying that, and it was a decision that could easily come back to haunt us, but what was the alternative? At least by keeping stum, we'd hopefully avoid a lot of unwanted attention.

But it was Tony's role in the whole thing we found the hardest to understand. I suppose we both thought we'd known him pretty well. He didn't work for us so much these days, less and less over the past couple of years, but that didn't mean a thing. He was still someone we thought we could depend on, and right up until the previous night he'd never let us down once. So what had made him suddenly turn a gun on me and Eric, as well as a man he'd never even met before, just like that? This was the big question.

We'd left it that I would see what I could dig up on Fowler while Joe would do the same with Tony,

and we'd meet up the following day. In the meantime, I needed to be rid of this motor, and Fowler's briefcase, which was still on the front seat.

The lights up ahead turned red and I came to a halt in the nearside lane, the third car back. In front of me was a black BMW with tinted windows blasting out a thumping bass so powerful that it was making me shake in my seat. When I'd been a kid, punk had been the big thing, and my mum had constantly droned on about how the music || sounded terrible and you couldn't understand a word the singers were shouting, and I'd thought what the fuck did she know? Now I knew it was a generational thing. This stuff, this garage shite that had suddenly become all the rage, it was a pile of dung, to be honest with you. There weren't even any tunes as such, just some bloke bragging about how hard he was, and how much the ladies rated him. Kids these days - they've got no taste.

I saw the flashing lights in the rear-view mirror and cursed, because I knew straight away that I was trapped. The lane next to me was full of traffic and the lights were still red. The cop car put its hazards on and two uniforms got out, donning their caps. I was just going to have to front it.

They came round either side of the Range Rover and the one nearest me tapped on the driver's-side window.

'Afternoon, officer,' I said as jauntily as possible.

'Can you turn your engine off, sir, please?' he asked, giving me the standard copper's-in-control, I'll-know-if-you're-guilty-don't-try-to-hide-it gaze. He was about twenty-five and not particularly big.

Rosy cheeks, too. About as menacing as Tony Blair.

The lights were still red, and on a main road as well. I couldn't believe it. No wonder London had traffic problems. That was the fucking mayor for you. A coma victim could have done a better job.

Seeing as I had no choice, I switched off. The other copper, who was even younger, looked to be inspecting the bullet holes on the other side.

'How can I help you, officer?'

'Can I just take these for a moment?' he asked, leaning in the window and removing the keys from the ignition.

'What's the problem? I'm in a bit of a hurry, to tell you the truth.'

He gave the interior a bit of a nose and spotted the two dark stains on the back seat where Fowler had bled. I'd given them a clean-up earlier that morning, but they still looked a bit suspicious. I'd never been much cop at domestic chores.

There appear to be bullet holes in your vehicle, sir/ he said, totally deadpan, like he was telling me I had toothpaste round my mouth.

'I live on a rough estate, officer.'

The other one now opened the back passenger door and began inspecting the stains more closely. 'What happened here?' he asked. This looks a lot like blood.'

'It's red wine/ I told him. 'I spilled it in there yesterday. It's a right bastard to get rid of.'

'Would you mind stepping out of the car, sir/ said the first one, opening the door for me.

'No problem/ I said wearily, and got out.

Still holding the handle, he shut it behind me at

just the moment I delivered a ferocious uppercut that sent him flying. He landed on his back, absolutely sparko, narrowly missing the traffic in the next lane, and his cap rolled off, only to be immediately crushed by a passing minibus full of pensioners.

'Oi!' shouted his partner, going for his extendable baton.

There was too much traffic to cross the road before he caught up with me so I ran round the * front of the Range Rover, mounted the pavement, and charged him before he had a chance to actually extend the baton. I punched him full in the face, knocking him off balance, then got my leg round his and tripped him up. He went down, his nose bleeding badly, and I ran back round to retrieve my keys.

But cars were stopping all over the place now to watch the drama unfolding and the lights had gone red again. A well-built workman was getting out of his van and glaring at me, looking worryingly like he was about to carry out a citizen's arrest. Then, from up the street, I heard the sound of a siren. It meant a quick decision.

Run for it.

So that's what I did, and as I tore off at a rate of knots in the opposite direction to the siren, past the surprised expressions of passing civilians, it struck me then that however bad I thought my predicament was ten minutes ago, it was now a hundred times worse.

If anyone ever wanted to kill Johnny Hexham, he

would not be a difficult man to find. Every lunchtime between one and two, as regular as clockwork, he was in the Forked Tail public house, a mangy dive off Upper Street, gossiping with his lowlife cronies and plotting his next poxy moneymaking scheme. Sometimes he'd be there earlier, sometimes he wouldn't leave until the early hours of the following morning, but, without fail, he was always in residence for that one hour. I got there at ten to two, and waited in the doorway of a boarded-up shop across the street, trying to look inconspicuous. As it was a Friday, I guessed that the la/y little shit would be in for an all-dayer, but, like the creature of habit he was, I thought he'd probably whip out for a few minutes to place some bets on the horses, having picked up some tips from the Paddy barman. I didn't much want to approach Johnny in the bar where there were too many people with big ears, but I would if I had to. Things were not going well for me and I wanted some answers quick.

And bang, like an assassin's dream, there he was, coming out of the door, already filling out one of the betting slips he always carried with him. I looked at my watch - one minute past two - and crossed the street, coming up behind him.

'Johnny Hexham. Long time no see.' And it was, too. Getting close to six months.

He swung round and clocked me straight away. He didn't look too pleased but worked hard to hide it. 'All right, Max,' he said, coming to a halt. 'How's it going, mate?'

I walked up and took him casually by the arm.

The grip was light but firm enough to let him know I wasn't fucking around. 'Not good, Johnny. Not good. There are a few questions I need answers to fairly urgently, and I think you might be able to help.'

'What's the Bobby, then?'

'Eh?'

The Bobby Moore, score.'

'It's about a certain Mr Fowler.'

'Fuck/ he said. 'I knew he'd be trouble/

Tou don't know the half of it.' I let go of his arm and we walked down in the direction of Chapel Market.

Johnny looked at me nervously. We might have been old schoolmates but he was switched on enough to notice that that wasn't going to count for much in this conversation. I am a man of compassion but, to be honest, you don't want to get on the wrong side of me.

'What happened, then?' he asked.

Tou put this bloke, Fowler, on to me. Why?'

There was nothing bad about it, honest. I just thought the two of you could do some business. He needed some security--'

'How do you know him?' I had to remember not to use the word 'did'.

'I don't really. It was Elaine who put me on to him. Elaine Toms.'

'Jesus. Is she still around?'

Elaine had been in the same year as us in school,

way back when Duran Duran were the kings of the
rock world and furry pixie boots were all the rage.
She'd always been the girl the boys liked because,

without exception, she fucked on the first date, the first date only ever meant buying her one drink, and she was nice to look at. Which you've got to admit is something of a rare and joyous combination. Not that I'd ever managed to get her in the sack. There'd always been too much of a queue in front of me. And I'd been a bit of a skinny runt in school, too. Like decent wine, I'd matured with age. The hadn't clapped eyes on Elaine in getting close to fifteen years, probably longer, and briefly wondered what she looked like now.

'Yeah, Elaine's still around. She's the manager of Fowler's club.'

'The Arcadia.'

'That's the one. I still see her now and again uucduse I drink down there sometimes. Not often, like, cos it's a bit too young for me, all these kids jumping about, out of it on all sorts, but it's worth a Captain Cook. Anyway, she told me that Fowler was having trouble with some people and he needed protection. She asked me if I knew of anyone who might be able to assist and so, you know, I thought about it for a couple of minutes, then your name popped up. I know you're into all that shit. I thought you could do with the business.' He turned and gave me his trademark boyish smile, the one I knew had got Elaine Toms into bed on more than one occasion back in the old days. Johnny Hexham, the loveable rogue.

But it didn't work. Not today. 'It was a bad move, Johnny.'

He looked worried. 'Why? What happened?'

We turned into Chapel Market and made our way

down the middle between the two lines of stalls. As usual, it was noisy and crowded. I decided against giving him the whole story. Johnny was no grass and probably wouldn't go to the law if his balls went missing, but it was best to err on the side of caution.

'I almost got killed. That's what happened. These people Fowler had trouble with, they weren't messing about.'

'Blimey, Max, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you in the Barry. I thought it was routine stuff.'

'Who are these people? And what's the trouble he's been having, exactly?'

The don't know. Honest. It was something to do with the club. That's all I was told.' He exhaled dramatically. 'Fuck, this is bad news. What's happened to Fowler?'

I glared at him. 'Forget Fowler. And forget you ever put him in contact with me. OK?'

Johnny's head went up and down like a nodding dog. 'Yeah, yeah. Of course. No problem. Consider it done.'

I took his arm again, this time squeezing harder. He turned to protest but I stared him down. 'Are you sure you're telling me the truth, Johnny? You know nothing about that club that might help to explain why people are getting all trigger happy with Fowler?'

'No...'

'Because if I find out you do know something, anything at all, then I'm going to hunt you down and I'm going to kill you. Understand?' Harsh words, but definitely necessary under the circumstances.

'Fuck it, Max, I'm telling the truth. I know there's some dealing goes on down there, charlie and all that, but that's about it.'

They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I slowed right down and stared straight into his. But the windows were dirty and I couldn't tell whether he was bullshitting or not.

'That's all I know, I swear to you. Look, Max, I'm t srry. I really am. I was just trying to help.'

I let go of his arm, and managed a brief smile, though God knows what there was to smile about.

'Well, it's a brand of help I can do without in the future. And remember, say nothing about seeing me to anyone. OK? Including Elaine Toms.'

'No problem. My lips are sealed.' He gave me a Concerned look. A mate to a mate. 'Everything's all right, though, isn't it, Max?'

'Oh yeah,' I told him, turning away. Ticketyfucking-boo. See you around, Johnny.'

Gallan

I didn't have to work that night but, with my home life being as non-existent as it was, I decided to stay late in the incident room and catch up on paperwork. Benin wasn't so keen and took off bang on five-thirty, something I duly noted. There was an all-units out on the car I'd spotted with the bullet holes in it. Two of the station's uniforms had stopped it and there'd been an altercation with the driver, who'd fled the scene on foot, having

assaulted and injured both officers. Suspected bloodstains had been found in the vehicle, which was registered in the name of Max Iversson, an ex soldier with no previous record, who matched witness descriptions of the driver. Thankfully, it was nothing to do with me any more, but I was pleased that my observance had paid off, even if the uniforms who'd done the stopping and who were now off sick probably weren't.

It was ten to nine when I left the station. I went to a cheap Italian off Upper Street I occasionally frequent and had a bowl of pasta and some garlic bread, washed down with a couple of welcome bottles of Peroni now that I was off duty. I suppose you could say it was a lonely way to spend a Friday evening, and you'd be right, it was, but I was beginning to get used to it. This time barely a year ago, it had all been a lot different. I'd been a DI at another station south of the river, heading up through the ranks in the direction of the DCI slot, with three commendations under my belt. Crime down there was bad, the hours were tough ... Paradise it wasn't. But it wasn't a bad life and, unlike a lot of my colleagues, I still had a stable domestic situation. A wife of fifteen years, an eleven-year-old daughter, a decent house in an area where the weekly mugging tallies were still in single figures...

Then, on the night they brought in Troy Farrow, it all changed.

Troy Farrow was a seventeen-year-old street robber who specialized in making victims of schoolkids my daughter's age, relieving them

of their mobile phones and pocket money, and old ladies, who he liked to pick off on pension day, sometimes breaking a few frail bones in the process. He had nine convictions altogether but had only spent a total of three months inside, so the law didn't exactly have him shaking in his Nike trainers. He was shouting and cursing and threatening all sorts as the arresting officers booked him in for what was likely to be his tenth conviction: the violent removal of a mobile phone from the ear of a young secretary foolish enough to have been walking down a busy street early evening without keeping her wits about her. Unfortunately for him, the street was under surveillance by -Hirers in plain clothes and he was caught within minutes. I was detailed to interview him, along with a DC, because we were interested in getting information from him regarding the near gang rape of an eleven-year-old by a group who'd also robbed her of her mobile and the bag of sweets she was carrying. We didn't think Farrow had been involved - it wasn't his style to molest his victims, and the suspects had been described as being aged between twelve and fourteen - but we were pretty sure he would know who was. There wasn't much that went on in Farrow's estate, crime-wise, that he wasn't aware of, and kids like that would almost certainly have bragged about what they'd done.

Farrow calmed down as he was taken down to the interview room by two of the arresting officers, with me and the DC following a few yards behind. What happened next is still something of a mystery. As Farrow and the arresting officers turned and

I entered the room, he turned and said something to jg
one of them that I didn't quite catch but which I IT
was told later went along the lines of 'You pussies "W
can't do nothing with me'. The officer had then Ł
made a fatal mistake. He'd let his frustration with ^
the legal system and the cocky criminals who fre- f <
quented it get the better of him, and had apparently *
called Farrow 'a black bastard', causing a further,
much more violent struggle to ensue. We'd hurried
into the interview room at just the moment when *
* fit, *

one of the officers slammed Farrow's head into the
wall. Not hard enough to knock him out, but *
enough to open a nasty cut across his forehead.
'Assault! Assault!' he'd screamed. They're killing 1
me! Get me a fucking brief! Now!' The two arresting
officers had let go, and we'd helped Farrow, \ who was handcuffed
behind his back, into one of
the chairs. 'Get my brief/ he'd said, all calm now, Ł \ blood oozing out
of the wound. 1 want to make a % formal complaint. I ain't saying
another word until f
I've seen my brief.' And he didn't. Not a word.

The formal complaint made, all four of us who'd
been in the interview room were later questioned
by representatives of the Police Complaints
Authority, and all of us stuck to the same story: that
Troy Farrow had stumbled during the struggle and
had accidentally knocked his head against the wall. 'j
The arresting officer who Farrow claimed had f '
racially abused him denied the charge but did -^ I
admit calling him a bastard, and I couldn't ^

comment on this because I hadn't heard the j
exchange. I know that a lot of people would think it
was wrong for me not to say what I saw but at the J

time I thought no lasting harm had been done. Farrow was patched up by the station's doctor and needed two stitches, and, anyway, it was no more than he deserved. Plus, I didn't want to be the whistleblower. The police get enough flak as it is, and sometimes when you're a copper it does feel like the whole world's against you, so you don't want to be putting the knife into your own side. In the end, I was never going to be the one who ruined a colleague's career (which is what I would have done) over one second's stupidity and hotheadedness. I just couldn't justify it to myself.

And, at first, it looked like we might have got away with it. I don't think the people from the PCA believed us but it was our word against that of a Known criminal, and we weren't budging, so eventually they had little choice but to conclude that the incident was accidental, and that Farrow had misheard what the arresting officer had said.

But that wasn't the end of it. A couple of months later the second arresting uniform, the one who hadn't pushed Farrow's head into the wall, admitted what had happened to a bloke in his local pub after one beer too many, only to find out afterwards that the bloke was a local investigative journalist, doing an expose of racism in the Force. With the conversation recorded, the story appeared two days later in the local paper, and the case was suddenly reopened. I found the local media and even London Tonight parked on my doorstep, asking me if I was a liar and a racist. I might occasionally be the one, but I'm definitely not the other. The whole thing was a nightmare and, although my

boss, DCI Renham, a guy I'd worked for for getting close to five years, fought to keep me in my position, the tide of attention was overwhelming, and in the end, with the story refusing to go away, the Brass were forced to act. Both arresting officers lost their jobs; the DC, with me, was put back in uniform; and I was demoted to DC.

It was a shameful episode, the whole thing, and for a long time I found it difficult to come to terms with. You see, in my eyes, I hadn't done a lot wrong. I'd made a mistake but I thought the punishment far outweighed the crime. I took it out on my wife, made life difficult for her, and maybe things between us hadn't been quite as strong as I'd thought, because three months later, after one argument too many, we separated. It turned out she'd been having an affair. I suppose this would have been understandable were it not for the fact that the other man happened to be the intrepid journalist who'd broken the story in the first place. The cheeky bastard had gone round to interview her about what effect the story was having on her and the family, and clearly it was having quite a big one because somehow, not long afterwards, maybe even that day, they'd ended up in the sack.

What do you do in that sort of situation? What can you do? Nothing except pick yourself up, dust yourself down, and remember that what goes around comes around. There is justice in this world, it's just that sometimes it takes a long time before it bothers to show itself. I had no choice but to cling to that fact as I gathered up my possessions, put in for a transfer, and headed north of the river for the

first time in my career, ending up at probably the most controversial station in the entire Met, a place still haunted by the betrayal of one of its most senior detectives.

DS Dennis Mime was without doubt Britain's most corrupt police officer: a valued and longstanding member of CID by day, a hired killer with God knows how many corpses to his credit by night. His shadow still hung over the station like a noxious cloud, even though it had been close to two years since his grim secret had been uncovered and he'd disappeared into thin air. It didn't matter. Time would be a slow healer here, and there were a number in CID, including DCI Knox, who'd be forever tainted by their long association with the station's most infamous son. Mud sticks, and maybe that was why I'd settled in so easily there.

Since my arrival, I'd rented myself a half-decent flat in Tufnell Park, and had managed to pull myself back up to the rank of detective sergeant. A far cry from the old days, and I was still waiting for justice (my ex and the journalist were now shackled up together and my daughter even claimed that she quite liked him), but things could always have been worse. I still had a job and, against all the odds, I still got something out of it.

I left the restaurant at five past ten and headed round the corner to the Roving Wolf, a pub used by the station's CID, to see if there was anyone in there. It was busy, but I spotted a couple of DCs I knew vaguely standing near the bar and joined them for a couple of pints. They were both interested in how the Matthews case was going but

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I couldn't tell them a lot. Slowly was the word that j b about best described it. Conversation drifted on to < *? other things and I left them at eleven, wandering *~ down onto Upper Street in search of that elusive t late-night creature, the black cab.

Upper Street was buzzing as usual, its constant *, stream of pavement cafes and trendy bistros bustling with custom as people of all ages, and pretty much every race under the sun, took advantage of the balmy evening. Strains of jazz, > * mamba, flamenco and half a dozen other musical styles drifted out of the open doors and windows of * a dozen different establishments, giving the place a 4 pleasant, continental feel. It almost felt like being Ĥ on holiday and, for one who'd travelled up Upper Street a few times back in the 1980s, the transformation was incredible. Once a barren, dark place of nasty drinking hovels and little else where only the adventurous and the foolish came after dark, it *

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had now become Islington's version of Paris's Left 7 j Bank. If you weren't careful, you might even forget to watch your back.

Incredibly, I managed to hail a cab near Islington j > Green after only five minutes, which had to be some sort of record for that time of night. I thought about heading home but for some reason I wasn't that tired. Instead, I asked the driver to take me to the Arcadia nightclub. He gave me a funny look in the mirror but did as he was told and we made our way in silence up to the Highbury Corner roundabout, and then left onto the less continental and more menacing Hollo way Road. I was hoping to catch Roy Fowler in residence and collar him for ;

a few minutes since I felt confident that if he didn't have anything to hide, he'd return there sooner rather than later. If you're in the nightclub business, you don't trust other people to look after your investment for too long, not if you want anything left at the end of it.

Four hundred yards up the Holloway Road, just past the Liverpool Road turning, the traffic slowed H't down as a large group of maybe twenty-five or thirty people standing outside a pub suddenly spilled out into the road. Seconds later there were shouts and the sound of glass smashing, and a group of five of them split off from the rest in what looked like a wild dance. Others ran over to nile in and the whole scrum of them lumbered _Uj the middle of the road, breaking apart and reforming as half a dozen individual battles were fought, oblivious to the cars driving by. A bottle sailed lazily through the air, bouncing off the roof of the vehicle in front of us before ending up unbroken in the bus lane on the other side of the street.

'Fucking kids,' said the taxi driver in a voice that was half-snarl, half-sigh, as the group, most of whom looked no more than twenty, swirled back towards the pavement. One of them went down, putting up his arms in a vain effort to protect himself as he disappeared beneath a rapid-fire welter of kicks from at least three others. A girl screamed something unintelligible and rushed out of the watching crowd to intervene, wading into the kickers, handbag aloft. The one on the ground, sensing an opportunity, jumped to his feet and got

out of the firing line. He was holding his head and bleeding from the nose.

The taxi driver accelerated and we left them behind to their fighting. 'Fucking kids/ he said again. "They get worse and worse.' I nodded and mumbled something in reply, thinking that that was the thing with London. One minute you were drinking in the ambient atmosphere of a laid-back summer evening, the next you'd stepped unwittingly into an ugly battlezone. I suppose that's why some people like it so much. The variety.

There was a long queue of revellers, mainly under-twenty-fives, snaking back along the street from the entrance to the Arcadia. I got the cab to stop directly outside, paid the driver in full, and tipped him a quid. 'Enjoy yourself/ he said, with a wave, as he drove off. Probably about ten years too late for that, I thought, but you never knew.

I walked to the head of the queue where a group of four male and one female door staff were frisking the waiting punters. One of them turned to me as I approached and gave me the same sort of funny look the cab driver had, like what on earth was a bloke in his mid-thirties in a suit he looked like he'd been wearing all day doing coming to a trendy joint such as this. 'Teah?' he said, by way of greeting.

I produced my warrant card and thrust it in his face. 'Police. I'm here to see Mr Fowler.' I was getting deja vu now.

He inspected the card, then looked back at me. 'I don't think he's here tonight/ he said.

'Well, Miss Toms'll do/ I said, and walked past him.

There was a line of four further doormen in the foyer just inside the main entrance and I walked past them, showed my warrant card to a very thin young lady with big hair at the desk, and asked her to phone up to Fowler. She reiterated what the doorman had said about him not being in, but I insisted. She let the phone in his office ring for about thirty seconds before telling me he wasn't there. Next she tried Elaine Toms, who apparently was in, but wasn't answering either. I had no great desire to enter the club proper but it didn't look like I was going to have any choice. I thanked her and headed through the door in front of me.

The place was heaving, as befitted a Friday night, with the majority of the youthful crowd packed onto the dance floor. The music was loud, repetitive and boring, the kind my daughter's thankfully too young to like. At the bar at the far end, I noticed a few older people, mainly men in their thirties, and even one or two in their forties, clustered together against the noise. Some of them were wearing suits, though none of them looked like office workers, and I wondered who they were.

My eyes drifted along, then stopped dead. Someone looked familiar. I walked nearer, maneuvering my way through the crowd until I was only about ten yards away. Now I was absolutely sure. No doubt about it. I'd seen his photograph four hours earlier, after it was faxed over by his old regiment. The man in front of me, drinking a bottle of Becks and looking like he owned the place, was Max Iversson, the fugitive half the station was looking for.

There was no way I was queueing to get into **.

Fowler's place. There must have been two hundred W

people standing there like lemons while they < g*

waited for the doormen to give them the sort of 11

attention my ex-missus used to give me when she'd ^
drunk too many white wine spritzers. But who

wants it off some bald bloke with no neck? Not me, -

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that was for sure. I thought about heading straight to the front and saying I was mates with Elaine but, to tell you the truth, I didn't really want to draw attention to myself, not now I'd suddenly turned into the Fugitive. So I headed round the back, jumped over the locked gate that led into the staff car park, and scanned the deserted rear of the building for any sign of an entrance. It took all of about three seconds for me to spot a window slightly open on the ground floor, about a foot above head height. It wasn't much of a size but I'm quite a slim lad so I was confident I was going to get in. I hauled myself up with one hand while using the other to flick off the latch and open the window up fully. At the same time, I heard the unmistakable sound of piss hitting urinals and, as I poked my head inside, I saw a row of three blokes staring up at me as they deflated their bladders.

'Evening,' I said with a ready smile, trying hard to wriggle through the gap. 'Tou couldn't give us a hand, could you?'

The bloke nearest me, a young student type about twenty or so, looked shocked but nodded anyway, re-deposited himself in his trousers, and

grabbed hold of my nearest hand, giving it a feeble

tug

'Come on, boy, put some welly into it. You

couldn't even give yourself a hard-on with a grip like that.'

He tried again and, after a few grunts and groans of effort, managed to pull me in, with me landing on him a fair bit harder than I think he was expecting, i thanked him as he got unsteadily to his feet and, ignoring the strange looks coming from the other blokes in there, headed out of the door and into the club, recoiling momentarily from the wall of sound that hit me.

I scanned the room for Elaine, not sure I'd even n-v.'otrm/e her after all this time, but couldn't see any sign of her. Mind you, I couldn't see a great deal among the buzzing crowd. I took a brief moment to admire a few of the scantily clad young females who seemed to be in abundance, then fought my way to the bar and waited for a space to open up, before ordering myself a beer from one of the harassed-looking bar staff. When it came about two minutes later, it cost me three quid. Three quid for a lousy bottle of Becks. If it was true that people were fighting for ownership of this place then it was no wonder. The money being turned over must have been incredible. I took a sip from the bottle and turned away from the bar, finding myself spme space near the dance floor.

Which was when I saw her, walking purposefully in my direction while talking to one of the doormen, a stocky bloke who was striding fast just to keep up with her. I recognized her instantly.

She'd changed quite a lot from school, as you'd imagine - I mean, it had been a long time - but it wasn't so much in the look. It was more the poise, the way she carried herself. Back then she'd been attractive, with lovely big brown eyes and a good body, but she'd never really made the best of it, probably because she hadn't really needed to. Now she looked hot, the type of woman most blokes are immediately attracted to because they know without a second's doubt that she'll be a demon between the sheets. She was wearing a black cocktail dress which matched her long curly hair and high-heeled court shoes. I wondered then whether that hound Johnny had slept with her more recently than school. If he had then he'd been a lucky man.

She turned away from the doorman as the two of them reached the bar and our eyes briefly met. Although she was still a few feet away and there were a number of people in between us, I saw an immediate flicker of recognition pass across her face. She stopped for a moment, then looked at me quizzically before approaching.

*Max? Max Iversson?' she shouted above the noise, walking up to me.

I got a glorious scent of musky perfume and warmth as she came up close. I tell you this, I wanted to have this woman before I'd even opened my mouth. She might have started off the chain of events that had almost had me killed but I'd suddenly become a man who was willing to forgive and forget.

'Hello, Elaine,' I said as coolly as I could manage.

'Long time no see. How are you? You look good.' I gave her a smile.

She smiled back. 'I'm well. You?'

'Yeah, not bad, not bad,' I said, my mouth almost in her ear. I was only going to be able to keep up a conversation with this amount of background noise for so long.

'Christ, it's a bit weird running into you like this. The last I heard you was in the army.'

'I did ten years, but I finished a long time back. You know how time flies.'

'Too right. So you're still local, then? I haven't seen you in here before.'

'No, it's a little bit young for me, to be honest. It's my first time.' And my last at these prices, I thought.

'So what brings you in here? On the pull, are you?' She grinned.

'Well, I came to see you, actually.' She looked surprised. 'It's about Johnny Hexham.'

The surprise turned to concern. 'Johnny? What about him? He's all right, isn't he?'

'Oh yeah, he's fine.' That bastard was always fine. 'At least he was when I left him earlier. Look, Elaine, I know it's an odd request, but I need to talk to you fairly urgently and it would be a lot easier if it wasn't here.'

The concern now turned to suspicion. This was a woman with a speedy turn in facial expressions. 'Look, Max, I'm running this place pretty much on my own tonight, so if you've got something to say--'

'I own a company that provides security. A few

days ago you asked Johnny to put someone you * know in touch with a company like that.'

She clicked. 'Oh shit. And yours was the company?'

'Correct.'

'So where's Roy? I haven't seen him all day. Do you know what's happened to him?'

That's what I've got to talk to you about. But I don't want to do it in here. Is there any way you can get out and we can go somewhere a little more private? And a bit quieter?'

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. 'I'll see what I can do. Wait here. I'll be back in a minute.'

I nodded and stayed where I was as she turned and disappeared into the crowd. While she was gone, a kid of no more than eighteen, out of his head on something, walked into one of the pillars that bordered the dance floor and knocked himself ***** out. I watched as people stepped over him like he wasn't there until eventually a couple of his mates turned up and, laughing, dragged him away. Then, a few yards beyond them, I saw a bloke who looked well out of place. Mid to late thirties, scruffy suit, thick black hair; to be honest with you, he looked a lot like Columbo in his early days and, like Columbo, I knew straight off he was a copper. He was talking into a mobile phone and watching me at the same time. Our eyes met and I knew he was on to me, though Christ knows how. It was time once again for quick thinking. If he was in here, there could be more of them out front, making it too risky to go out that way.

I turned and, as casually as possible, headed back in the direction of the toilet, speeding up the moment I'd pushed through a large group of girls out on a hen night.

Gallan

As soon as I saw him, I knew I had to act fast. I didn't have a clue what he was doing there but he didn't look like he fitted in, and he was on his own. All that, however, was by the by. The most important thing was that he stayed put until reinforcements arrived. I pulled the mobile from my jacket pocket and called the station, at the same time moving slowly towards a pillar by the dance floor where I could keep an eye on him without attracting attention. I was bumped by a young bloke pushing past me and I turned and gave him a look, not that he even saw it. He was already ten yards further on. Cheeky little bastard. Dispatch picked up and I informed them loudly of my position and the fact that I was within thirty feet of a wanted man and needed back-up. I needed to repeat myself twice above the noise, and when I looked back towards Iversson I saw that he'd spotted me. He turned and walked away and I followed rapidly, telling Dispatch that he was on the move. 'Get here fast, I don't fancy tackling him on my own. Not after what happened this afternoon.'

Iversson disappeared into the toilet and I broke into as close a run as the crowds would allow, unsure how I was going to handle this. I didn't

want to corner an ex-para in an enclosed place and present him with no option but to fight. I'm not as young as I used to be, or as fit, and the reason I'm a detective is that I like to detect rather than get involved with all the physical stuff. Plus, I knew I'd lose. But I wasn't going to let him go either. Not after he'd put two of our uniforms on the sicklist.

I pulled open the door to the toilets four seconds after he'd gone inside, turned left, and headed into the urinals area. There were half a dozen people in the place, all relieving themselves, while at the far end of the room in front of an open window was Iversson. He looked like he was just about to jump up and try to get out through it. Eight yards separated us.

He turned and saw me and I put my hands up to indicate that I wanted things to end peacefully, which I did. 'All right, police. Come along now, Max.' And then, of course, the standard police cliché: 'ft You're in enough trouble as it is without adding resisting arrest to the charges.' I took a couple of slow steps forward, careful not to agitate him.

Iversson nodded and added his own cliché: 'It's a fair cop, guv/ he said, taking a step towards me. s Then, without warning, he grabbed an unlucky punter by the back of his shirt and flung him bodily in my direction. The poor sod was still in the process of taking a leak and I had to jump out of the way to avoid the spray, sliding over in a suspect-looking puddle as I did so. I banged my right knee jarringly hard and the mobile flew out of my hand. Iversson immediately turned, heaved himself up to the window with an agility that made

me look even more like a Keystone Kop, and began squeezing himself through.

The bloke he'd pushed at me was first to react. Putting himself away amid a welter of curses, he turned, ran up to the window, and grabbed one of Iversson's flailing legs with both hands. It was a stupid move. The other leg bent, tensed, then lashed out, all in one split-second movement, striking the bloke in the side of the temple and sending him crashing into the communal urinal. His head hit the wall with an angry thud. Iversson's legs then began to disappear like spaghetti being dragged into a giant mouth. Ignoring the mobile phone, I jumped to my feet and ran towards them, managing to grab hold of one of his shoes just as it started to go out of the window. It came off in my hand and I was suddenly left standing looking at a fashionable-looking khaki moccasin while he made good his escape. I heard him land on the other side, then get to his feet and start running, impaired but hardly disabled by the fact that he now only had one item of footwear.

I looked at the semi-conscious bloke moaning on the floor, then at the handful of other punters who stood watching me in slightly amused silence, then finally at my watch.

It was twenty to twelve. Way past my bedtime.

Iversson

I was waiting when she arrived back at her Clerkenwell apartment. I watched her get out of the

taxi and pay the driver from across the street, then as he pulled away and she turned towards the entrance, I crossed the road and jogged up behind her.

'Elaine/

She turned round quickly, saw it was me, and narrowed her eyes. 'Well, well, well. The wanderer returns. What happened back there? You didn't tell me the police were after you.'

I stopped in front of her. 'I couldn't tell you anything in there. It was too bloody loud.'

'You'd better come in/ she said, fishing in her handbag for a key. 'I think we've got a fair bit to talk about, don't you?'

'You can say that again.'

'How did you find out where I lived?' she asked when we were inside her first-floor apartment.

'You're in the phone book/ I told her.

'So are plenty of other people with the name Toms/ she said, leading me through to a nicely furnished lounge with comfy-looking black leather chairs. She slung her jacket over one of the chairs and turned to me, waiting for an answer.

'Not as many as you'd think. I narrowed it down to five, then phoned Johnny Hexham. He said he thought you lived in Clerkenwell and there was only one E. Toms in Clerkenwell. Maybe you should think about being ex-directory.'

'I'll bear it in mind.' She looked down at my dirty sock. 'I won't ask/ she said.

'The police. They don't just want collars any more. They want everything.'

She smiled. 'Do you want a coffee?'

'Yeah, please.'

Five minutes later, when we were sitting in the leather chairs facing each other, she asked me what had happened with Fowler, and how come the police were after me. There was no point holding back, not if I wanted her to open up to me, so I told her everything, bar the bit where I shot Tony, which she didn't really need to know. In the account I gave Tony escaped and I never saw what happened to him.

She sat back in her chair and rubbed her hand across her temple. It was a gesture vaguely similar to one of Fowler's. 'Shit,' she said, which just about summed it up. 'I can't believe it. Dead. Poor old Roy.' Which I thought was a bit rich. Fowler had asked for it, I hadn't.

'What happened after I got out tonight?'

'Two vanloads of Plod turned up, and this detective who was already in there, the one chasing you, he started asking me a load of questions about what you were doing there.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I said I didn't have a clue who he was talking about. He didn't push things.'

'So, who are the people Fowler was having trouble with? I think I owe them after what they've done to me and one of my best employees.'

She leant forward and gave me a cold stare. 'Max, I'm telling you now. Do not get involved. Consider yourself lucky you're still in one piece and leave it at that.'

'Just tell me, Elaine.'

Tou don't want to know. Honestly.'

Till be the judge of that.'

She paused, then, seeing that I wasn't going to give up, started talking. 'Roy's been under a lot of pressure lately and he's fallen in with some of the wrong people. He was getting into debt with the club.'

'How did he manage that with those prices? I'd have thought he'd be a millionaire.'

'He's a big spender and he's got a nasty coke habit that's been eating away at his finances. Anyway, he started borrowing money from people he should have kept well away from, and it didn't take long for them to start calling for their money back. And that's when he really fucked up. He allowed them to start dictating to him how he should do business. They wanted to sell their drugs in Arcadia with Roy overseeing things.'

'From what I hear the club's always had a drugs problem.'

'There's always been some dealing there, yeah, but not as much as some people seem to think. The place got raided a couple of times before I joined but that was a long time back and they never found nothing. But this was different. This was organized dealing.'

'When did it start?'

'I don't know exactly. At the time Roy didn't say anything to me about it. He was done in the past for importing gear, back in the eighties, and he was inside for four years, so it wasn't something he wanted to repeat. The dealing was all very underhand and if you'd come in there any night, like you did tonight, you wouldn't have seen it going on.' I

nodded. That was true enough, although plenty of people had been off their faces. 'But there was stuff in there and if you'd asked the right people you'd have got coke, E, whatever you wanted. There's a few who do the deals, mainly the doormen, and they've never got much on them at any one time, so even if you were an undercover copper, you could only do them for possession. They never deal in big quantities. Roy kept the bulk of the stuff hidden in the place but I never knew where.

'Anyway, a week or two back, Roy starts acting really strange. Turning up late, shutting himself in his office, not getting involved in the running of the business. I asked him what was wrong but he just brushed me off. Then a few days back our chief doorman dropped dead, and it turns out he was poisoned.'

'Poisoned? I'd forgotten you killed people like that.'

That's what the law said. And when Roy heard about it, it really set him off. He was jittery enough before, but after that he was all over the place, like he was next or something. But still he didn't want to talk about it.

Then one night after we'd shut, I found him in his office, drunk or coked up or something. I told him he was going to have to tell me what was wrong, that he couldn't carry on like he was, and that's when I think he realized he was going to have to say something to someone. So he told me. He told me all about the dealing, how it was organized, what was going on. He sounded really gutted, like he didn't want to be involved.' Lying bastard, I

thought, but didn't say anything. 'But the thing was, that wasn't the worst of it. He was skimming them. These associates of his. Taking more than his cut of the profits. A lot more.'

'How the hell did he think he was going to get away with that?'

She shook her head. 'He told me he was using the money to invest in something - and he wouldn't tell me what that something was - that would double or triple the cash he put in. Then, with that other cash he'd made from it, he'd pay these people what he owed them and get them out of his hair for ever.'

'Except it didn't work.'

'No. The investment never came through and they found out about the skimming before Roy made his cash. On the night I talked to him in his office, he'd been told by them that they knew what he'd been doing and that they wanted the money back with a hundred per cent interest, or they wanted the club. Roy was scared shitless. He didn't have the readies and he didn't want to give up the club. It would have left him with nothing. He'd asked them for an extension on the debt so that he could get himself sorted out, but they weren't interested. They're not the sort of people who specialize in being helpful.'

The bet they're not.'

'When he talked to me he said they'd given him three days to come up with one or the other. The club or the money. He told me that even if he handed over the deeds to Arcadia, he still reckoned there was no guarantee they wouldn't break his

legs for fucking them about. Or even kill him. He said that if he was going to go and see them, then he wanted back-up, but didn't know where he was going to get it from. He didn't know who out of the door staff would stand up for him and wasn't going to count on any of them. So he asked me if I knew of anyone independent, some security company ;who could be relied upon to provide him with a decent escort.'

'Why did he ask you?'

She shrugged. 'I don't think he knew where else to turn. We've worked together a while and I think he trusted me.'

I finished my coffee and put it on the glass coffee U;ble next to me. 'And you said you'd see what you could do?'

She took a pack of cigarettes out of her handbag and offered me one. It had been a month since I'd quit but for the last few hours I'd known it was never going to last. The way things were going, living to a ripe old age with healthy lungs was the least of my concerns.

'Cheers,' I said, and took one.

She lit it for me with a thin black lighter, then lit her own and sat back in her seat, crossing her shapely legs and blowing smoke towards the ceiling. The dress rode up provocatively and I tried hard, but without much success, to ignore it. 'What choice did I have?' she asked. 'I didn't want to get involved, course I didn't, but he's been good to me since I've been working for him, and the least I could do was try to help out. So I spoke to Johnny and he spoke to Roy and it sounds like he put Roy

I

in touch with you. I'm sorry about what happened but, you know, I had no idea it would end like this.'

'Forget it. It wasn't your fault. But I've got to be honest with you, there's a serious ring of bullshit about what he was telling you.'

'Look, I--' '= *

'Teah, I know, I know. You're telling me the truth.'

'I am.'

I'm sure you are, but there's got to be a lot more to it than that. If Fowler was carrying the deeds to the club in the case he took to that meeting, then why kill him before he's signed them over? And, in fact, why kill him at all? Particularly when he's got people with him. There's a lot of unanswered questions.' I was silent for a moment. 'But at least there's one you can answer.'

'I've told you, Max. Don't get involved. It's not worth it.' She stared me down as she spoke, in the way my mum used to do. The expression said: Don't argue. I thought she'd have probably made a good Miss Whiplash, and a lot of judges and politicians would have paid good money to be dominated by someone as good-looking as her, but I really wasn't in the mood to be told what to do.

'I want to know who killed my friend, Elaine. And who tried to kill me.'

'Why? It won't help you. I promise you, there's nothing you can do.'

'Just tell me.'

She stared straight at me. The Holtzes.'

That stopped me dead.

'You know who they are, don't you?'

'Yeah, I know the Holtzes.'

Everyone who was anyone in that part of town loiew the Holtzes, or who they were anyway. Led by their reclusive founder, Stefan, who was now on the wrong end of middle age, they were one of north London's premier crime families, rulers of a criminal empire that was worth tens of millions. And evil bastards, too. Word had it that they'd been involved in dozens of murders as they'd fought to stay at the top, but, even after years of police attention, they remained intact. If anyone could have staged what had happened the previous night, it was the Holtzes.

Flaine sighed. 'So, now you see why I said don't to,i involved.'

'Jesus/ I said, as reality sank in. 'No wonder I almost got killed.'

'I didn't mean to make you a part of it,' she said defensively. 'I didn't know it would be you, and I honestly didn't think that they'd stoop to killing him, or your friend.'

'It's the Holtzes, for Christ's sake. They're capable of anything.'

She shook her head wearily. 'Fuck, what a mess. What the hell am I going to do now?'

'Keep quiet about it. That's the best thing. If they find out you knew too much about what was going on, well...' I tailed off, knowing I'd made my point. 'Anyway, I'm the one who's got things to worry about. Not only am I on the run through no fault of my own, I'm a witness, too. I saw two men die. The law are going to be very interested in

getting me to talk. The Holtzes are going to be very interested in making sure I don't.'

'But you couldn't pin anything on them, could you? It was your friend, Tony, who did the actual shooting, so he's the only one who could actually get in any trouble.'

'Maybe, maybe not. The thing is, they might not see it like that. Especially if the coppers manage to trace the blood on the back seat of my car back to Fowler. If that gets public then I'm going to be on the Holtzes' hitlist, aren't I? As well as everyone else's.'

We didn't speak for a few moments. She sat there, watching me now, puffing on her cigarette. It was difficult to tell what she was thinking behind the dark eyes.

'I feel partly responsible for what happened/ she said eventually. I didn't bother telling her that she was partly responsible. At that moment I needed all the friends I could get. 'You can stay here for a couple of days if you want, until things die down/

Thanks/ I said, 'I appreciate it.'

'Do you want a drink? A proper one?'

'Yeah, I think I need one. What have you got?'

'Most things. What do you want?'

'A brandy, please. And a beer, too, if that's all right.' I thought that I might as well take advantage of the hospitality on offer, not sure how long it was going to be lasting. She didn't look like she'd taken offence and smiled as she got up and kicked off her shoes. Her toenails were painted a bright red, which they always say is a sign of passion. I began to stop thinking about my current woes and instead

concentrated on more immediate possibilities.

She went into the kitchen to make up the drinks and I took my shoe off and casually followed her in. 'You're looking really good, you know/ I said, thinking that I was going to have to buy a book on chat-up lines or at least put more thought into them. The thing is, I've always been a man who preferred the more direct approach. If I thought I vets in with a chance - and to be honest with you, I reckoned Elaine owed me one - I tended to go straight in for the kill.

Thanks/ she said, pouring the brandies. 'You're not looking so bad yourself. You seem to have improved with age.' She gave me a quick onceover, like she was checking out a dress. 'You've uuiked out as well. It suits you. You were always a bit too skinny in school.'

Cheeky mare.

I took the brandy with one hand and moved the other round towards her shapely rear, thinking that I was taking a bit of a risk here, since she didn't seem like the sort of person who'd suffer unwanted attentions in silence, and if she kicked me out I really was bolloxed because I had pretty much nowhere else to go. But as the hand made contact, and I gave the left cheek a gentle stroke, she shot me a look that said that after all the fucking mishaps of the day - and by God there'd been a few - I'd finally struck gold. Our lips met Mills and Boon style and her fingers crept up my inner thigh.

Not everything had changed since school, then.

Saturday, fifteen days ago

Gallan

'Do you ever stop work, Sarge?' asked Benin, nursing his black coffee. Turning up at the Arcadia on your tod at half eleven at night, getting involved in a scuffle, and then coming to work next morning. That's the sort of thing you're meant to do when you're like eighteen, isn't it?'

'I was trying to recapture the fading spirit of youth. I won't be trying again for a while.'

'So, did you get anything else from Elaine Toms?'

'Nothing of any use. She said she hadn't heard a word from Fowler, and she claimed she didn't know who Max Iversson was.'

'Do you believe her?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. I didn't see him with her so she could be telling the truth. There just seemed something a bit coincidental about it.'

It was nine o'clock on Saturday morning and Benin and I were the only people in the Matthews incident room. I hadn't left the club until quarter to one and I was tired. However, I didn't look as bad

as Benin, who was carrying a mean hangover, and whose breath smelled of long-dead fish. About the only thing he'd got remotely enthusiastic about in the ten minutes since we'd got in was the altercation I'd had with Iversson. He'd found it particularly amusing that the ex-para had chucked someone at me while they'd still been taking a leak. 'Simple but very effective, I should think,' was how Ivj'd summed it up. Fair enough, I suppose. He was right.

It was day six of the heatwave and day seven of the Matthews murder inquiry, and we had plenty to keep us busy. Knox, who wasn't coming in until later, had dropped on my desk a note with a photograph of a hard-looking blonde with Myra i iiiidley's haircut and the same sort of amiable, light-up-the-world expression. The note identified her as Jean Tanner, a former call-girl, two of whose partial prints had been recovered from Matthews's flat, one of them on a coffee mug, suggesting she'd been more than simply a passing punter after some gear. Knox had supplied us with the address, somewhere up in Finchley, and had instructed us to go round, take a statement from her and find out what she'd been up to there. Like a lot of the work on a murder investigation it was routine stuff, but something that had to be done. He signed off by telling us to continue trying to track down Fowler, whose prints had also been found on a number of items in Matthews's flat, even though he'd claimed the two had never socialized.

Before we collared Ms Tanner, we drove over to the Priory Green estate to show her photo to

Matthews's neighbours and see if she was the blonde woman identified by two of them as having gone to his flat more than once in the past few weeks. This, at least, would give us something to throw at her if, for some reason, she proved uncooperative.

The estate itself, a medium-rise collection of red and greybrick buildings just north of the NatWest building on Pentonville Road, was leafy, quiet and relatively well kept. A few years earlier it had received a large cheque from the National Lottery's Heritage Fund to spruce things up, and there was still a lot of building work going on. So far the money looked to have been pretty well spent, which isn't always the case with construction projects. Priory Green had none of the menace of so many of London's sixties- and seventies-designed council estates, those graffiti-stained fortresses with their mazes of darkened walkways so beloved of muggers everywhere, that for a copper always feel like enemy territory. Bad things might have gone on here, but they were done in quite a pleasant setting.

Things got off to a good start as well. Both the witnesses - a young black woman with a very fat baby and several other yowling kids in the background, and an elderly man who insisted on haranguing us about the estate's supposed litter problem - were in residence and able to confirm that they'd seen the woman in the photo going either in or out of the flat on several occasions, though not in the past couple of weeks. The elderly man thought he might have seen her three times,

but he couldn't be sure. While we were there we knocked on a few other doors to see if we could jog some memories but, where anyone bothered to answer, we were given the kind of welcome usually reserved for Jehovah's Witnesses, and no-one could provide any help.

I wasn't sure how much use it was finding out that Jean Tanner, ex or current prostitute, had visited the flat of a known drug dealer on more than one occasion, even if he had supplied her with coffee, but at least it was something. However, our good fortune, if good fortune it could be called, didn't last very long. On the way to Jean's place there was an accident on the Caledonian Road that held us up for getting close to half an hour in ^..aJily increasing heat. Then Berrin, who was in charge of navigation on the basis that I didn't trust him behind the wheel in the state he was in, got us lost in the backstreets of East Finchley. By the time we finally tracked down the address - a flat in an ultra-modern, heavily alarmed four-storey block that sat like an eyesore between the Georgian townhouses on either side of it - it was almost half eleven. And, after all that, she wasn't in.

We had six more addresses to visit that day, all of them doormen who had worked at one time or another in the past six months at Arcadia. The list had been supplied by the proprietor of Elite A, a Mr Warren Case, himself a one-time doorman. We'd interviewed Case, who could fairly be described as a man of many sovereign rings, the previous afternoon at his home, an untidy third-floor flat in Barnsbury which also doubled as Elite A's offices.

Case had shown us Elite A's certificate of incorporation and VAT registration both with his name on it, and had provided us with a list containing nine names. Two of them had already been interviewed during the course of the investigation, and another had left the country for Australia more than a month before the murder and was, as far as Case knew, still there. He'd given us the addresses of everyone else and then we'd been on our way. As we'd left, I'd asked him how well he'd known Roy Fowler. 'Well enough to know that he was a slimy cunt,' he'd replied evenly. Which was probably a fair enough description, but made me think that if you've got a man like Case saying that about you, then you've really got problems. Although, of course, at that time I didn't know the half of it.

We hadn't phoned ahead to warn any of the interviewees we were coming, which was not untypical practice in a murder inquiry. It was unlikely that any of them would know anything of real help, but if they did and they didn't want to talk, a surprise visit would help to prevent them making up a convenient story. However, it also meant that, like Jean Tanner, they might not be there when we called, particularly on a hot summer's day like this one, and not surprisingly the first two on the list weren't, while the third was just going out as we arrived. He'd only worked with Matthews on a handful of occasions, and claimed he couldn't really recall too much about him. 'He was a bit of a wanker, I remember that much,' he told us, which wasn't exactly news. Him and Fowler must have been a right pair of cards.

By the time we left him it was gone one o'clock and food called. We stopped at a Greek-owned sandwich place off the Finchley Road, and ate in relative silence, both feeling worn down by the drudgery of detective work.

'You know, don't get me wrong, Sarge,' said Berrin between mouthfuls of turkey, salad and mayo baguette, 'but I thought that there'd be more excitement to murder investigations. I don't mean that it should be fun or anything, but it just seems to be the same sort of monotony that you always get.'

I chewed thoughtfully on my ham and pickle sandwich. It was quite tasty except for the fact there was too much fat on the ham. 'Dave, if it was really like it was on *The Sweeney*, no-one would ever leave, would they?'

'I know. I just wish it felt like we were getting somewhere, that's all.'

He had a point, and at that moment I felt the same way. It would have been a good day to sit out in the garden with a decent book, catching a bit of sun and letting the world drift idly by. Or maybe even to take my daughter out somewhere, making the most of the fact that she was still young enough not to look at me with a teenager's wincing embarrassment. But I'd learnt long ago that you don't do policework for the laughs or the job satisfaction. You do it for the desire to put away criminals, which basically is an end in itself. I could see, though, that Benin, who was still new enough to think there was a lot more to it than that, was flagging and needed a bit of an interest injection.

'This Jean Tanner's got herself a nice pad,' I said,

taking a sip from my mineral water and wishing it was beer. 'How much do you reckon it's worth?'

'Just the location's got to be worth a fair bit. The thing is, we don't know what her actual place is like.'

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'Well, say it's a one-bedroom flat. It's a nice area of Finchley, it's still got to be worth - shit, I'm no estate agent, help me out here.'

Two hundred grand. Maybe more.'

'And it's probably bigger than one bedroom. I don't reckon we'd be looking much short of two fifty. That's a lot of money for a prostitute, the type who hangs about with a lowlife like Shaun Matthews. Particularly if she's got a drugs habit.'

'So what are you saying?'

And this was where the interest went out of the injection. 'I don't know/ I said. 'It just seems odd.'

The fourth address was on a residential road of rundown whitebrick terraces, less than half a mile away from Highbury stadium. The traffic was appalling on the way there, mainly due to the fact that Arsenal were playing at home, and it was half two and about ninety degrees when we finally parked up almost directly outside the lower ground-floor flat of Craig McBride. According to Case, McBride had worked for Elite A for the best part of a year in a freelance capacity and was still used by them at fairly regular intervals. He was twenty-seven years old and had prior convictions for ABH, threatening behaviour, theft, and possession of Class A and B drugs, a fact that had been discovered when we'd run his name through

the computer. It wasn't strictly legal any more for someone with his record to be employed as a doorman, unless he'd somehow convinced the council that he was a reformed character, which I doubted. But I knew it happened, and for the moment it wasn't worth taking the matter up with Warren Case.

A set of greasy steps led down to McBride's abode. The front door was shabby, the once-white paint peeling off in strips to reveal dull-coloured wood beneath, while an ancient-looking hanging basket containing nothing but dry earth and a cluster of weeds hung limply from one of the outside walls. There was a small dirty window to the light of the door. I wondered briefly whether it had ever been cleaned. It didn't look like it. Straightening my tie, I peered through it and immediately my spirits lifted. Eureka. Just what we needed.

Within a Western country's somewhat limited means of coercion, there's no surer way of getting someone to talk than to give them the alternative of criminal charges, and it looked like Craig McBride was indulging in an activity that left him very much exposed to the latter. Even through the stains on the window, I could clearly make him out sitting on a sofa in his front room behind a coffee table on which a plate piled with white powder was sat. Next to the plate was a large tub of baking soda, and next to that were small transparent plastic wraps, each containing more of the powder. Sherlock that I was, I hazarded a guess that the contents of each one weighed pretty much exactly a

gram. McBride himself, dressed only in a pair of 5 shorts, was leaning forward, head down, fiddling with what looked like a small electronic weighing machine. As if confirmation of what he was doing was needed. Criminal mastermind young Craig ^ was not. He might as well have put up a sign on the || road saying 'Drugs this way', such was his total fl and utter recklessness. Never underestimate the % stupidity of criminals. Sometimes it's the only thing that keeps a lot of us going. *

I turned to Benin, put a finger to my lips, and motioned for him to have a look. Benin peered in, then stepped back, smiling. 'It seems a shame to disturb him,' he whispered. 'He looks so busy. Do you think it's worth knocking on the window?'

I shook my head. 'No, he might make a dash for it, or put up some resistance. Let's spring it on him Jj^ once we're inside.' I stepped forward and knocked i hard on the door. J|

There was no immediate answer, which was to be expected. He would now be desperately trying to hide the stuff before someone spotted him through the window. I gave him a few seconds, then knocked again. This time, I motioned for Benin to take a look through the window, knowing that we had to play this right. I wanted McBride to see Benin but not me (I looked too much like a copper), but I also wanted him to see him after he'd got rid of the stuff. That way he'd probably open the door.

As it turned out, we timed it perfectly. I stood back and watched while Benin gave him a friendly wave and a smile through the window, like a particularly enthusiastic door-to-door salesman, before

receiving a muffled 'Who the fuck are you?' in return. Benin just kept smiling and moved away from the window.

By the time the front door opened a few seconds later and McBride's head appeared round it, already mouthing abuse, we'd removed our warrant cards and were lifting them for him to see. His eyes widened momentarily and I spoke quickly upfore he thought about making a dash for it. 'Mr McBride? We're here to ask you a few questions regarding the murder of Shaun Matthews.'

He looked nervous, which was to be expected. 'Who?'

'Shaun Matthews. I believe you worked with him on a number of occasions on the door of the Arcadia ..;6htclub/

'Oh yeah, yeah, Shaun. That's right.'

'Can we come in?' I said, pushing the door open and stepping confidently over the threshold like I owned the place.

McBride tried to stand his ground, but without a great deal of success. 'Look, it's not a good time right now.'

'It won't take more than a few minutes,' said Berrin, pushing his way in behind me.

'Oi, you can't come barging in like this. Don't you need a warrant?'

I smiled and looked him directly in the eye, an easy feat since we were only inches apart. 'Why? Have you got something to hide, Mr McBride?'

'No, course not.'

'So what's the problem?'

'I'm just going out. Can't you come back later?'

But he spoke this last sentence with defeat on his breath, and I knew we had him.

'We'll be very unhappy if we have to come back later, Mr McBride,' I said, 'and we'll be asking ourselves why you wouldn't let us in, and that might mean we have to investigate you further.'

'All right, all right, you win.' He moved away from the door and led us through the cramped hallway and into the kitchen, well away from the room * where he'd been dividing the drugs.

The kitchen was a mess with a big pile of empty plates and cups in the sink. The tops were dirty and there was a vague smell of grease in the stale air. He leant back against one of the tops while we stood in the middle of the floor facing him. 'Ask away/ he said, seemingly a little more confident now. Probably thinking what he was going to tell his friends about this near miss and how stupid the coppers were for not having a clue what he'd been up to when they arrived. I decided to put a pin in his balloon and establish control immediately.

'We'll level with you, Mr McBride. This is a murder investigation, so it's information relating to the murder that we're interested in, nothing else. The fact that you've got a load of white powder hidden somewhere in your sitting room, and that that white powder's very likely a Class A substance, and that possession of such powder with intent to supply is an offence which always ends in a substantial custodial sentence, particularly for someone who already has a lengthy criminal record' - the blood was draining from McBride's face and his body had tensed - 'is not our primary

concern. However, if you don't answer our questions truthfully, then we may suddenly become very interested in that white powder and what it represents. Do we make ourselves clear?'

McBride looked like he was weighing his options. The tension in his muscles did not bode well. Even the tattoos on his arms were rippling.

'Now, you could try and make a break for it. You're a big man, you might even make it. But then we'll have the drugs and we'll put out a warrant for your arrest, and you'll get caught, and then you're in a position one hell of a lot worse than if you simply stay here and answer our questions. Do von understand what I'm saying?'

How do I know you won't charge me anyway, whatever I say?'

I've just told you why. Now let's do this interview somewhere a bit more comfortable. Your drugs den'll do.' McBride started to say something but I wasn't listening. I turned and walked back towards the front room, with Benin in tow.

We both sat down on the sofa and motioned for McBride to sit on a chair opposite. He did as he was told, his expression that of a man gutted to have been caught out in such a stupid way.

'All right,' I said. 'How well did you know Shaun Matthews?'

He didn't answer us for a couple of moments as he continued to weigh his options. I looked casually down over the side of the sofa to where the tin of gear, the individual wraps, the baking soda and the scales had been hastily stashed. It seemed to do the trick. 'OK, I suppose.'

Berrin consulted his trusty notebook. 'You worked the door at the Arcadia on sixteen separate occasions in the three months prior to Mr Matthews's death. I expect it's fair to say that he was there on most of those occasions, as he was the chief doorman.'

'Yeah, I knew him quite well. He was all right. Fancied himself a bit, but all right.'

'He was the main dealer in the place, wasn't he?'
I said.

'Look, I don't want any of this getting back to me

Once again, I looked over the side of the sofa at the incriminating evidence. 'I don't really think you've got a lot of choice, Mr McBride. Not unless you don't mind spending the next couple of years behind bars, wondering why you're the only person left who still believes in that outdated concept of honour among thieves.'

'OK, OK, yeah. He was the main dealer in the place. He ran it all on the floor.'

'How did it work?' asked Berrin.

'Basically, all the doormen were dealers. Not big time, mind. But we were allowed to supply.'

'By whom?'

'The management.'

'Roy Fowler, yeah?'

'Yeah, him.'

'Carry on,' I told him.

'We had the monopoly on the place. If anyone else was caught dealing in there, they got a serious

kicking. What happened was that it was common knowledge among all the punters that the doormen

were the people to go to when you wanted something. You couldn't just keep going up to the entrance and asking for stuff, so if someone wanted to buy something they asked the doormen inside the building, you know, who were patrolling the dance floor and that. They didn't usually carry anything on them, just in case it was undercover coppers, but if they were happy with the buyer, they'd give their order to Fowler or Matthews, or one of the other staff, and they'd go off and get the gear. The doorman doing the selling would pocket the cash and then, at the end of the night, everything would get divvied up. Fowler got eighty per cent of everything you sold, that was the going rate, you got the rest.'

'And was business good?' asked Berrin.

McBride nodded. 'Not bad.'

'How much would you make in a night?'

'A couple of hundred on a good one.'

Berrin whistled through his lips. That's a lot of money, especially for the bloke taking the eighty per cent.'

'Did all the doormen get an opportunity to make that much money?'

'Yeah, we took it in turns to walk the club.'

I thought about this for a moment. If McBride was to be believed the club was turning over some serious drugs cash every night. I did the sums in my head. It was more than enough to kill for.

The Holtzes own the Arcadia, don't they?'

McBride's face experienced a passing shadow of fear. Quick, but noticeable. 'It's Roy Fowler, as far as I know.'

'Who owns Elite A?'

'Warren Case.'

I sighed. 'You're not really helping us very much, Mr McBride. I know that it's Warren Case's name on the company's certificate of incorporation, but I want to know who really owns it. Who takes the profits.'

'I honestly don't know. I just work for them.'

Once again, my eyes drifted towards the drugs. 'What is this stuff? Speed or coke?'

'It's speed.'

'Looks like a fair amount of it.'

'Drugs Squad'll be interested,' mused Benin.

'Very.'

McBride was sweating. It might have been a hot day but his nerves were unmistakable. He knew he had to talk but the prospect was scaring him. 'Listen, I've told you the truth. I don't know who owns it. A couple of times this geezer would turn up at Elite A and come in and talk to Case, and once I saw him leaving with this big holdall. I heard him say something to Case, you know just joking, saying that he must have done well that week.'

'So it's fair to assume that the holdall contained money?' McBride nodded. 'But I'm a bit confused here. You said Fowler made eighty per cent of the takings and the individual doormen made the other twenty per cent. So where did all these holdalls of cash at Elite come from?'

'From what I've been told, Fowler took the money and checked it, but he didn't keep it all. Most of it went back to Elite.'

'Which means that Elite and Arcadia were very

closely linked, wouldn't you say?' McBride gave a very reluctant nod. This man you saw at Elite's offices, who was he?'

'Jack Merriweather.'

'Well, well, well.'

Jack Merriweather. Better known, at least behind his back, as Jackie Slap, on account of his shiny Mekon-style bald pate, itself the result of a sudden feenage attack of alopecia. The story went that at the age of sixteen young Jackie had been forced to share a cell in a detention centre with a powerfully built homosexual named Lennie, and such had been the stress of having to fend off Lennie's unwanted advances that he'd lost all his hair. At the time it had made the news, because there was a ! of controversy over the 'short sharp shock' method of teenage incarceration. One wag had suggested renaming it the 'short sharp slap', and for Jackie at least the name had stuck.

Nobody took the piss out of Jack Merriweather any more though. Not now he was a part of Stefan Holtz's crime organization. It also answered at least one question about who really ran things at Arcadia. Merriweather worked directly for Neil Vamen, who was one of Holtz's closest associates, in many ways his eyes and ears in the outside world now that the big boss had become something of a recluse. I'd met Vamen once a few months earlier when we'd interviewed him after his name had come up in connection with a box of twelve Kalashnikov rifles that had been discovered at Gatwick Airport. A short, barrel-bodied individual with thinning hair and striking turquoise eyes, he

was good-looking in a thuggish sort of way. And very polite, too, I remember that. Someone in CID had once said that Neil Vamen put the manners back into murder, and, I had to admit, there was definitely something charismatic about him. But, like all these blokes, you had this feeling that if you crossed him you'd pay dearly for it, and he'd been linked to more than one murder, including that of a young female accountant who knew a little too much (nothing ever proved, of course, he was far too canny for that), which to me sort of took a bit of the gloss off the image of Raffles, the gentleman gangster. It fitted with his way of doing things that he used Merriweather to collect the money. The truly successful criminals never get their hands dirty.

'I presume you're aware that Jack Merriweather works for the Holtzes?'

'Tve heard that, yeah.'

'So it's probably safe to assume that the Holtzes f own Elite A and therefore almost certainly own Arcadia, isn't it?'

'Are you asking me or telling me?' he said, using the same phrase Elaine Toms had used the previous day.

'Don't fuck us about, McBride/ I told him coldly. 'We're only talking in your front room because at the moment we're giving you the benefit of the doubt. However, so far you've told us absolutely nothing that we didn't know already, so you're still looking at a nice long spell in the nick. Now, answer my question unless you want to continue this interview down the station.'

'All right, yeah, I suppose it's safe to assume. I didn't know for sure he owned the place ... both places ... but there were rumours. I don't like to ask too many questions about that sort of thing. You know, I don't want to get on the wrong side of Stefan Holtz.'

I changed tack. 'How well did you know Shaun Matthews? Honestly.'

'I got on all right with him. I knew him a bit, you know.'

'Did you ever socialize with him outside work?'

McBride paused before answering, at the same time breaking eye contact with me. 'A couple of times, yeah,' he said eventually. 'I was both ex-army so I think he thought we had something in common. Most of the other blokes didn't really like him much.'

'Why not?' asked Benin.

'Well, like I said, he rated himself. Threw his weight about a bit, and he could get nasty if he thought anyone was holding back on money owed to the club.'

'Did he ever upset one particular person more than any of the others? Enough to give them a motive for killing him?'

'He had a run-in with one geezer, one of the permanent doormen, John Harris. John was getting a blowjob in the bogs from one of the punters when he should have been out on the floor. I don't think it would have mattered - you know, that sort of thing goes on a lot. The birds are attracted to doormen, aren't they?'

'I wouldn't know,' I said, hoping my daughter

would never flutter her eyelashes at a lowlife like McBride.

TBut the thing was, he did it quite a lot. He was always poking the punters, sometimes two at a time, and the thing was he had, you know, staying power, so he could be at it for fifteen, twenty minutes, sometimes even longer. Which I suppose is why they liked him. Anyway, Shaun had just had enough that night so he went charging into the Gents, kicked open the door, and dragged John out by his dick. John didn't know what had hit him you know, element of surprise and all that - and he got a fair old slap. Broken nose, couple of black eyes. Nothing serious, but I think it was the humiliation of it. Shaun marched him through the whole club with his trousers still half hanging down, and booted him out the door. Told him to come back when he'd got his sex drive under control.'

'And did he come back?'

'Not after that. Well, you wouldn't, would you? Not after someone's taken those sort of liberties with you.'

'When did this incident take place?' asked Benin.

McBride shrugged noncommittally. 'A couple of months back. Something like that.'

Benin and I looked at each other. We hadn't heard about this run-in with John Harris, but then no-one at Arcadia was going out of their way to be of help. Benin made a note in his notebook. We'd track down the sexually energetic Mr Harris later.

T> id Shaun Matthews ever discuss with you any problems he had with anyone, problems that might have resulted in someone wanting to kill him?'

McBride shook his head. 'I know he dealt a fair bit on the side, and I don't think he had too much in the way of respect for the punters buying off him. He told me a couple of times that he used to mix his gear pretty heavily, but he never seemed to worry too much that anyone'd come back and give him any grief about it. He said he'd just tell them to fuck off if they did. That was the thing with Shaun: he wasn't really scared of no-one. He always thought he was hard enough to get himself out of any shit that came his way. You know what I mean?'

i knew exactly what he meant. Plenty of criminals are like that, too cocky to realize they're walking on quicksand. Matthews was only the latest in a long line of those who found out too late, if they found out at all, that they weren't as invincible as they'd thought. 'We're aware of one particular incident where he dangled a man by the ankles over the balcony of his flat. Do you know anything about that?'

McBride tried without success to stifle a laugh. 'Teah, I remember him saying something about that one. I think the geezer was a student or something. Shaun sold him some stuff that was meant to be skunk but he'd got it cheap off some Moroccan geezer because it was so shit. Apparently, all it did was give you a sore throat. The bloke tried to get his money back and Shaun demonstrated his refunds policy. I don't think he came back again.'

'Have you got a name for this student?' asked Benin.

He shook his head. 'No. He just told me the story

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when we was out one night. I think he said the ~ bloke might have gone to City and Islington, but I couldn't say for sure.'

'Did Matthews ever say anything to you about ripping off the Holtzes?'

McBride gave me a withering look. 'Shaun might have been a bit of a headcase, and a bit of a wanker if you're honest about it, but he wasn't totally fucking stupid. He wouldn't have ripped off people like the Holtzes, and if he had, he wouldn't have said nothing about it. Not to no-one.'

I sat forward in my seat and stared hard at him. I don't like getting withering looks from smalltime crooks who've got little but not-so-fresh air between their ears. 'You're still not helping us much, Craig. And you're not giving us any reason to walk out of here and forget that you're sitting on a pile of dope that most assuredly is not for personal consumption. Are you?'

'Look, I don't know who killed him. Honest. You know, what the fuck can I do about that? I can't make it up, can I?'

'Several witnesses reported seeing Matthews with a woman with short blonde hair on a number of occasions. We think they may have been romantically linked. She certainly used to visit him at his flat. We've now identified her as Jean Tanner. Here's a photo of her. Not the most flattering one, but mugshots never are.' I took it out of my pocket and handed it to him. He looked at it quickly, then handed it back, shaking his head. 'Td like to think, for your sake/ I continued, 'that you can tell me what her relationship was with Mr Matthews.'

McBride made a number of noises suggesting he was thinking hard but they weren't particularly convincing. 'He might have mentioned something once, about some girl he was seeing, but he didn't really say anything about--'

'Craig McBride, I'm arresting you on suspicion of possession of Class A--'

'All right, all right, hold on. Don't be hasty.'

'What do you mean, don't be hasty? I could grow a beard waiting for you to tell me anything.'

'Look, I don't want any of this getting back to me. Seriously'

'Any of what?'

McBride put his head in his hands, then removed [hern and exhaled loudly. 'Any of what I'm going to tell you.'

I didn't get too excited. 'We'll treat it as an anonymous source if it's applicable,' I said. 'Now, I suggest you get on with it.'

'Shaun had a girlfriend, a girl he'd been seeing for a few months, and her name was Jean, but I don't know what her second name was. The thing was it was all really hush hush. I'm surprised anyone saw them together. He only told me about it one night after he'd had too much gear and drink. I think he wanted some advice.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, this girl, and I think it must be the same one, she was sort of already spoken for. She was seeing Shaun on the side.'

'It happens,' I said.

'Not to Neil Vamen it doesn't.'

Once again, Berrin and I looked at each other.

This certainly put a new angle on the whole thing. The gentleman gangster. 'You're telling us she was Neil Vamen's girlfriend?'

He nodded. 'That's what Shaun said.'

'Christ/ said Benin. 'No wonder he wanted it kept quiet. Do you think Vamen found out?'

'I don't know. Honestly.'

'How did Shaun meet her?'

'I heard she used to work as an escort girl for this agency Roy Fowler runs called Heavenly Girls. Maybe that's how he met her.' I raised my eyebrows. This was an interesting one. We hadn't realized that one of Fowler's sidelines was managing a brothel.

Berrin finished writing in his notebook and looked up. 'Neil Vamen's married, isn't he?'

McBride shrugged. 'Yeah, he is, and his missus is a looker too, but you know what blokes are like. Especially ones with money. Everyone knows he plays away from home.'

Berrin looked across at me, waiting to see what came next. It was difficult to know what more we could ask McBride, or whether what he'd told us was enough to get him off the hook.

'One more question,' I said. 'Who did you buy these drugs from?'

McBride sighed, looked pained for all of about one second that he was about to betray someone, then gave us the name of a fairly well-known local dealer. I knew immediately he was lying. The drugs had almost certainly come from somewhere within Stefan Holtz's organization. It was rumoured that Holtz himself strongly disapproved of drugs and,

unlike many underworld figures, had never touched them himself. However, his people were responsible for importing one hell of a lot of the cocaine that passed through London every year, so his personal stand clearly didn't prevent him helping to ruin the lives of plenty of other people.

I leant over, picked up the plate of dope and the individual wraps, and stood up. 'If you hear anything, anything at all about the murder of Shaun Matthews, I want to hear about it.' I handed my card to McBride who accepted it with a relieved expression on his face.

'Course I will/ he said. Thanks.'

'Where's the toilet in here?' I asked, walking out --- !.hc room, with Berrin following,

'It's just on the left. What are you going to do with the gear? I'll give it back, but the thing is I haven't paid for it yet.'

I went up to the dirty-looking bowl and emptied the plate into the water, before chucking down the wraps. I gave it a healthy flush and watched as most of it disappeared.

T> on't take the piss, Mr McBride,' I told the distraught-looking doorman as we left his flat. 'We've done you a major favour here.'

When we were back in the car, Berrin gave me a worried look. 'Was that such a good idea, Sarge? You know, letting him off like that. We could have got a lovely little collar there.'

'And it would have just bogged us down in paperwork, and wouldn't have done anything to hinder the Holtz supply chain. Sometimes you've got to let the small fish go so you can get hold of the

big ones. But do me a favour and don't say anything to anyone about it.'

'Course not. Do you think it was worth letting him go like that, though? Did we get enough out of him?' ^,

'We've got other people with motive now, so it's 1 putting us further forward.' *

All we've got to do is find them.'

That, my friend, is what it's all about.'

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It was three o'clock in the afternoon when I buzzed Joe up and led him through to the lounge. It was a stinking hot day and all the windows were open. Outside, the traffic rumbled endlessly past. *

'Nice place for a hideout/ he said, dropping on the floor a bag containing belongings he'd picked up from my flat. He sat down in one of the leather chairs, and put the four-pack of beers he'd also brought down on the glass coffee table. I went and got a couple of glasses and emptied the contents of two of the cans into them. 'So, where's the girl?'

'She's gone out/ I said, sitting down opposite him. 'She'll be back later.'

'And how long's she going to let you stay here for? I mean, she doesn't even know you, does she?'

'I told you, I went to school with her.'

'But, Max, you're not eighteen. That was a long time ago now. You haven't seen her in, what? Twenty years.'

I took a drink from my beer. 'Not that long.'

'But long enough. You've got to be careful, lime changes people. She might just run to the law.'

'She won't.'

'Well, either way she's going to want you out of here pretty soon, isn't she?'

I nodded, not liking to think about that. After the sexual athletics of the previous night, I was in no hurry to go anywhere. 'I suppose so.'

So we've got to discuss what you're going to do. The police came round to see me this morning, asking about you. Questions like, what were you doing driving a car riddled with bullets? And why were you so keen to make a break for it when you were stopped for questioning, smacking two < <n>pers in the process? That sort of thing.'

'What did you tell them?'

'What do you think? I didn't tell them anything, just said I'd always thought you were pretty straight, and that I didn't think you were involved in anything untoward.'

'Do you reckon they believed you?'

He shrugged. 'Difficult to tell. I think so, but you never know. It helps that you've never been in trouble before. But they're definitely looking for you, Max, and that's not good.'

'You don't think they followed you here, do you?'

He shook his head. 'No, I was careful. Anyway, at the moment you're probably not a big enough fish to waste that many resources on. I mean, there's still no proof you've actually done anything other than deck a couple of coppers.'

'Fowler bled over the back seat when he died.'

Not much, and I gave it a fair old scrub afterwards, but one of the coppers spotted the stain when they stopped me. I don't know if they can trace it back to Fowler or not. What do you think?'

He pondered that one for a few moments. 'I doubt it. If they don't know who Fowler is and they haven't got a blood sample of his, then I would have thought you're in the clear.'

I took another drink from my beer. It was going down well. 'What a fuck-up/ I said, shaking my head. 'So did you get anything on that bastard Tony? Anything that might explain what the fuck he thought he was doing?'

'I talked to a few people, other people he'd been doing work with, but no-one seems to have anything bad on him. He did some guarding work for Barry Unwin, looking after wealthy Arabs, and he even had a stint through Barry as a minder for Geri Halliwell, and everyone reckoned he did a fine job. And he'd been with Barry a while, too. More than two years.'

'Well, something happened. Somewhere down the line he met someone who was willing to pay him big money to get involved in some very nasty shit.'

Joe seemed to notice his drink for the first time. He picked it lip and took a healthy swig. 'How about you? What did you get?'

I told him what Elaine had told me.

Joe rolled his eyes at the mention of the Holtzes. 'Fucking hell, Max, that's all we need. Let's make sure we stay well clear of it if it's anything to do with them. I don't want to get into a confrontation with people like that.'

I knew he was right, and if a man like him was saying it, then it was best to listen. But the thought of not doing something to retaliate still pissed me off.

'Joe, no offence, but I almost got my head blown off the other night. If I hadn't been carrying, I'd probably be at the bottom of the Thames now. It's sort of affected my viewpoint on all this. We also iujt Eric, and no way did he deserve to go like that.'

'I know he didn't, and apart from anything else he's going to be difficult to replace. And his ex missus called in this morning.'

'Shit.'

'Yeah, my sentiments exactly. He was supposed to be looking after two of their grandkids today, only he hadn't turned up. So she phones, asking me if we've seen him. Luckily she didn't know he was working for us Thursday. I said we hadn't clapped eyes on him since last week.'

'How did she sound?'

'Worried. She said it was totally out of character for him not to turn up, especially for his grandkids.'

'It would have been. He was always our most reliable bloke. I can't remember him ever missing a day. Did she sound like she was going to call, in the law?'

'Not yet, but she will do eventually, no question. And that's going to pose a problem because it'll give them a chance to make a link with you. We've just got to hope they don't take it too seriously. I mean, it's not like a kid going missing. This is a sixteen-stone ex-soldier in his fifties. They may just conclude he's fucked off on some military

adventure, but the problem is, it's all a little bit coincidental/

I had to agree with him on that one.

'Anyway, the best thing we can do is forget about everything that's happened and put it down to experience.'

'It doesn't seem right, letting them get away with it-'

'This was a professional operation, Max. Three people dead, but no peep from the press, no sign of any bodies. No nothing. It's like it never happened. fl Which is exactly the Holtzes' style. Do you remember that jeweller out of Hatton Garden, Jon Kalinski, the one who did a runner with about a quarter of a million in diamonds? About three years ago?'

Teah, I remember reading something about it.'

'Well, I heard he didn't do a runner at all. I heard f it was the Holtzes who had a role in that particular | disappearance. Apparently he owed Krys Holtz, Stefan's boy, a lot of money, which was part of some scam they were both involved in, and Krys was worried they weren't going to get much of it back. So he paid one of Kalinski's girlfriends to phone him up and invite him round to her pad in Hampstead. When he turned up, Krys and a few of his associates were waiting for him. They took the keys to his safe, found out where every penny he'd stashed was, then killed him. And the girlfriend. Dismembered them both in the bath tub, cleaned everything up so there was no trace they'd even been there, then took the bits out in suitcases in the middle of the night. Then they went down to

Kalinski's place of business and cleaned him out of everything he owned, and everything he didn't. Do you know how they got rid of the bits of the corpses?'

'I'm surprised you do.'

'Well, it might be bullshit, I don't know, but it's got a ring of truth to it.'

'Go on.'

'You ever wonder where all those thousands of maggots you get in fishbait come from?'

'No. I can safely say it's never crossed my mind once.'

'Well, they come from maggot farms, places where they breed millions of the bastards in these big stink ii;g rooms. One of the Holtz businesses is a maggot farm out in Essex. They chucked the body parts in there and then let the maggots eat them down to the bones. Then they ground down what was left into dust, and scattered it to the four winds. And that was that. No trace. Gone.'

'If they're so secretive, how come you heard about it?'

'I heard it from a bloke who used to know people attached to them. A while back. I never thought about it too much at the time, not until now.'

'And this bloke, isn't it possible to ask him what all this stuff with Fowler's about?'

Joe managed a humourless smile. 'Not really. The bloke was Tony.'

'Great.'

The point is, let's just leave it.'

'Don't worry. I think you've convinced me.'

'You're going to need to get out of town for a bit,

Max. Probably a couple of months at least. Until everything dies down.' He reached into the pocket of his jeans and produced two thick rolls of notes, which he put down on the table. There's six grand there. The money from the job the other night. Use it to rent a place down by the coast or something.' 'I can't take it all, Joe. Three grand of it's yours.' 'And half of Tiger Solutions is yours. Forget it. It's the least I can do. Let's see how things go and then, if you need any more, I'll try and pull some out of the business somehow.'

'Shit, Joe, I don't know what to say.' I leant forward and picked up the money. "Thanks, mate. Thanks a lot.'

That's what friends are for, Max. Remember it.' And I did remember it. Would always remember it. Me and Joe went back a long, long way. We were like that, you know. We'd been in the paras together and, even though Joe had been an officer while I'd never risen above the level of colour sergeant, we'd always been mates in a way that rarely travels across the ranks of the British army. I owed him now - but then, to be honest with you, I'd always owed him. You see, a long time back I'd done something to him that to this day he didn't even know about, but which meant that one way or another I was always in his debt.

Joe was two years older than me, and towards the end of his military career he got married to a German girl he'd met while we were stationed out there. Elsa, her name was; twenty-one, far too good-looking, and with an attitude to sex that you'd have to say was slap bang on the liberal end

of liberal. Why she got married, I'll never know. She just wasn't cut out for making do with a one-dickandtwo-ball escort. But the problem with Joe was the same problem you get with a lot of blokes: he was just too smitten to notice. I'd heard stories about her knocking around with other squaddies all through the engagement, but decided it was best to keep quiet about it. In the end, it was none of my business. Joe had made his choice and that was that. I know that might sound a bit harsh, but in my experience no-one ever thanks the bearer of bad news, especially when the bad news is about his missus and her shenanigans.

Then, a few weeks after the wedding, I ran into her in a local bar. She was on her own as well, which was unusual for her. She was quite a looker, was Elsa. We got talking and she told me that she and Joe had had an argument. I didn't mean for anything to happen, you know, but I offered to walk her home and one thing just led to another. We did it in a field full of bored-looking sheep (twice as well) and I knew I should have just left it at that and hoped nothing was ever said, but the thing was, Elsa had a way about her that could really reel a man in. She was addictive, that was the best way to describe her. We started to see each other regularly behind Joe's back, doing it whenever and wherever, including in their marital bed, which I know was a terrible liberty. I felt guilty about it, I really did, and jealous, too, because I knew I wasn't the only one of her lovers. But I just couldn't stop myself. That's my only defence, if you can call it that. I just couldn't help myself.

Then one day, no more than a couple of months after that fateful night in the sheep field, Elsa's partly clothed body was discovered in the grounds of a local high school. Her head had been smashed to a pulp with a blunt instrument. There was a police investigation that initially focused on the army base and its occupants, particularly the husband, but quickly spread into the local community as other lovers came out of the woodwork.

After only three days, an arrest was made. A nineteen-year-old local bloke, Dietrich Fenzer, had been seen arguing with her on the night she'd died, ^ not far from where the body was found, and it was \ known that he was one of her lovers. He also had 1 two prior convictions for crimes of violence. A search of his home revealed the murder weapon, a small lead-filled cosh, and he was promptly ^ charged. Six months later he was convicted and sentenced to twenty years in prison, which I'd always thought was a bit lenient, especially as he'd probably be out in ten.

The whole thing was extremely hard on Joe, as you can imagine, but he held up well considering the humiliation of having your new wife's numerous affairs aired in public. Thankfully for me, the police never did dig deep enough to find out about our little fling, so my friendship with him remained intact. But the reality was that it was the end of Joe's army career. He felt that he couldn't continue to command the respect of his men after what had happened, and he was probably right, especially since half of them had shagged her. Within a few months he'd left the military for good to begin a

new career as a security consultant, or, more accurately in those early days, a gun for hire. For me, though, the guilt never completely disappeared, and from then on I always felt that I had a lot to do to make it up to Joe for betraying him in such an underhand way. And here he was doing all this for me. It fair choked me up, to tell you the truth.

'Are you all right, Max?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, yeah. Just dreaming, that's all. All this humidity's sending me into a trance.' I pulled from my pocket a pack of cigarettes Elaine had bought me that morning.

Joe gave me a dirty look. He was like that, always v.-anting to make sure I stayed on the straight and narrow. 'When did you get back on them?' he asked, not worrying, however, about taking one off me.

'Well, getting shot at by one of my best employees started to break my resolve, but then, after spending most of yesterday running away from various members of the local law enforcement, I thought, fuck it, lung cancer's the least of my worries.'

We both laughed and drained our beers. 'Are you in a hurry/ I asked him, 'or have you got time for another one?' It was rare these days that we sat and socialized, and now I had the feeling that we might not get the chance for a long time to come. It seemed important to make the best of things.

He nodded. 'Yeah, course I've got time.'

So I poured the other two beers and we sat back and smoked and talked about the old days: people

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we'd known, experiences we'd shared, places we'd II

served. Only once did things go quiet, when Joe %

mentioned Elsa and his eyes clouded over as he *

thought back to what could have been. And I felt & [

guilty again and hurried on to the next subject, t'

maybe just a little bit too quickly. ||

It was early evening and Elaine had yet to reappear
by the time Joe said he had to go, and there was
something a bit gloomy about the formal handshake

we shared. As if we both knew that for some reason * '

nothing between us was ever going to be the same \$. i

again. ~

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The station was quiet that morning. The busiest night of the week had come and gone and the cells were slowly being emptied of the drunks, the brawlers, the low-level dealers and anyone else unlucky enough to have had their collar felt. It was another glorious day. The weather woman on the radio had announced chirpily that it was the seventh in a row with more than ten hours of sunshine. Temperatures expected to touch twenty nine degrees Celsius, eighty-four by the old measurement. No-one would be working who didn't have to, even though crime often went up in heatwaves. Tempers got more frayed, particularly in an overcrowded city; domestic burglary increased as people left their windows open at night. So, too, did rapes, for exactly the same reason. But who wanted to catch criminals on a hot August Sunday?

And that was the thing. I did. I wanted to find out who thought they were clever enough to kill

Shaun Matthews and get away with it. I wanted to prove them wrong.

It didn't seem as though too many of the squad shared my wish, or were at least prepared to break their backs over it, and the incident room for the Matthews murder was empty for the second morning in a row when I walked into it at just after half past eight. Benin was expected in, as was DI Capper, my immediate boss. It didn't surprise me that ^ neither had arrived. Benin had been particularly J reluctant to work that day because he'd had to break i a date, and had only had one day off in the previous fourteen, so it was unlikely he was going to make it in before nine. As for Capper, he was never on time if his superiors weren't working. Which was the i bloke all over. It was a testimony to his arse-licking skills, and the talent he had for creating a wholly false image of commitment and hard work, that he had reached the level of detective inspector on the back of having absolutely none of the skills required. He was a detective who couldn't detect, a civil servant who didn't like to serve, and a man manager who truly couldn't manage. Every word he ever uttered reeked of insincerity, and his habit of back stabbing colleagues was legendary. He had the luck of the devil, too. His predecessor in the DI's post had been a guy called Karl Welland, by all accounts a good no-nonsense copper who'd been forced to retire after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, paving the way for Capper to slip into his shoes in the absence of any other suitable candidates. Welland had been dead close to a year now, and Capper continued to thrive in a role

he genuinely didn't deserve. Who said life was fair?

There was a message from Knox on my desk, giving me the telephone number of one of the station's former CID men, Asif Malik, now of SO7, Scotland Yard's organized crime unit. Malik had left months before I'd joined, but I knew of him. Every one knew of him. He'd been the guy who'd worked most closely with Dennis Milne, the part time hitman. From what I heard, Malik had had nothing to do with any of his former boss's many crimes and was supposedly as straight as a die, but after what had happened he'd found it difficult to continue at the station, and had transferred to SO7 a few months later. Knox hadn't been keen initially to get SO7 involved in the Matthews murder investigation because he didn't want control of the case taken away from him and CID. But when I'd spoken to him the previous afternoon, he'd been interested in the Jean Tanner/Neil Vamen lead and had agreed that someone at SO7, one of whose jobs it was to keep tabs on organized crime figures in London, might at least be able to offer some insights. He'd added on the message (Knox liked his messages) that we were to continue to try to locate Fowler and if necessary widen the search for him, particularly in the light of his continued absence.

I got myself a coffee and tried Malik's mobile. It went straight to message so I left one, explaining who I was and why I was calling, and asking if we could meet up.

After I'd hung up, I reluctantly phoned my ex wife. The live-in lover, Mr Crusader, answered,

sounding like he'd just woken up. 'It's the man whose career you fucked,' I told him evenly. 'I'd like to speak to Cathy, please.' He told me angrily to try phoning later next time as Sunday was their day for lying in. 'Just put her on/ I said. 'It's about Rachel.'

Cathy came on the line sounding equally knackered and I heard Carrier telling her in the background that I'd sworn at him. You had to hand it to the bloke, he was a born whistleblower. There wasn't a tale he wouldn't tell. Cathy told me that she thought we'd got over all the childish name calling and I apologized, thinking that that would be the easiest tactic, and asked whether I was still having Rachel the following weekend.

'Well, can you fit it in round your work?' she asked, with a hint of sarcasm in her voice. 'The last time you were meant to have her--'

'I know, I know. I'll make sure I've got the time off. I haven't seen her in close to a month. I won't let her down.'

'You promise? I'm not having her looking forward to seeing you and then you dashing her hopes.'

'He can't be allowed to do that again,' said Carrier in the background. 'Just because he's unreliable.'

Not for the first time, I tried to understand what Cathy saw in the bastard. I'd always thought of her as a pretty decent judge of character, someone who knew a creep when she saw one, so it was doubly disheartening to have my view proved so emphatically wrong.

'I promise/ I said wearily. 'I mean it. I'll come and get her Friday evening and bring her back Sunday.'

Thanks, that'd be nice. Come about six, can you?'

'Sure, six is fine.' I started to say something else but she cut me short, saying she wanted to get back to sleep.

'See you on Friday/ she said, trying to sound pleasant, and hung up, leaving me staring at the phone and thinking that she never used to lie in that late on a Sunday.

'Morning, John. Nice to see you in bright and early.'

I looked up to see Capper come walking in, his suit jacket slung jauntily over one arm, a cheesy smile on his face. There were already sweat stains appearing on the underarms of his faded yellow shirt. It was, I thought, strange how unpleasant people often had unpleasant side-effects to their normal bodily functions. Perhaps it was some sort of divine justice, a punishment from God. I liked to think so.

'Morning, sir.'

'Everything all right?' He motioned towards the phone and I wondered if the bastard had been listening in. Probably.

'Fine. And you?'

'Very well. Had a quiet evening in and an early night for once. Done me the world of good.' He dropped the jacket at his desk, and walked over to the kettle. 'Do you want a coffee?'

'No thanks. I've just this minute finished one.'

Capper made general small talk as he prepared W his coffee and waited for the kettle to boil, and I ^ played the game, sounding interested and occasionally making comments of my own. The ~? thing about Capper was that he was nice to you if I he thought you were going to be useful to him and \$ he clearly thought I had potential, that maybe I wasn't going to be stuck under him for ever, which I suppose was one good thing. I think he also thought we got on well and, although I couldn't 4, stand him, it suited me to remain cordial. One thing A I'd learnt in the Force was that you never make enemies unless you have to. Pragmatism. That was J what it was all about.

Capper grabbed a chair and sat down on the other side of my desk with his coffee. 'How did it go with the doormen yesterday?' he asked, after explaining that his absence from duty the previous * day had been down to a 'family matter', whatever w that was meant to mean. Capper was a bachelor who looked like the sort of person any right minded sibling or parent would avoid like greasy dogshit on the pavement. He sat there now with a think-of-me-as-one-of-the-guys smile, showing yellowing teeth, etched firmly on his face.

I gave him a brief rundown, explaining that we hadn't got much that we didn't know already, but mentioning the possible girlfriend lead, as well as John Harris, the doorman who'd fallen out with Matthews.

'Who's chasing Harris?' he asked.

"The DCI gave it to WDC Boyd. She's on it today, apparently.'

He nodded, satisfied. I didn't tell him about the Vamen/SO7 angle. Knox would probably bring it up at the meeting the following day but for the moment it could wait. I didn't want Capper sniffing round and taking hold of leads I'd worked hard to build up myself. 'No sign of Fowler yet, then?' he asked.

'Nothing at all. He might have a connection to iius Jean Tanner, though.'

'How's that, then?'

'You know I said she was a prostitute? Apparently she used to work at a brothel which was or is supposedly run by Fowler.'

'Really?'

'A place called Heavenly Girls.'

Capper tried to hide it but I saw immediately that he knew the name, and that for some reason he wanted to keep that knowledge quiet. 'Hmm, that's interesting.' His words tailed off, and we sat in silence for a few moments. Where did you hear about this brothel?' he asked eventually.

'From McBride, the one who gave us most of the information.'

'I've never heard of the place,' he said, a little too forcefully. 'Do you reckon he was telling the truth?'

I shrugged, not bothering to mention that we'd effectively blackmailed the information out of him. 'I would have thought so. There'd be no point lying about something like that, would there?'

Capper nodded, acknowledging this fact. 'No, I suppose there wouldn't.'

At that moment, Berrin came in, looking dishevelled but considerably better than he had the previous morning.

'A bit late, Benin/ said Capper, getting to his feet. -5
 Benin quickly apologized to both Capper and jg
 me in that order, and took a seat. Capper told him *
 bluntly to get his house in order and went back to *
 his own desk. He might have thought that I was f
 potentially useful, but he clearly didn't feel the -. *
 same way about the younger officer. Plus, Benin * was a
 graduate, and, though he never said as much,
 Capper didn't like graduates. Benin looked suitably
 chastised for a couple of seconds, then pulled i a face at Capper's
 back, before sitting down in the
 chair he'd just vacated. 7
 As the two of us went over the day's itinerary, I j stole an
 occasional glance at the DI, who was now f
 staring intently at his computer screen. I couldn't *
 help but wonder what he knew about the Heavenly
 Girls brothel and how much of a bearing his knowledge
 might have on the investigation as a whole. >..

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 3?
 Roy Fowler wasn't answering any of his numbers;
 the Arcadia was closed; it was proving impossible
 to locate any outfit called Heavenly Girls; and the
 day was getting progressively hotter as Benin
 brought the car to a halt about twenty yards short
 of Jean Tanner's apartment building. According to
 the Land Registry, she'd bought it in 1998, while it
 was still being built, and now owned thirty per cent
 of the equity, while the other seventy belonged to
 her mortgage lender. According to them, she'd
 never missed a payment. Obviously Jean was getting
 quite a lot of money from somewhere, which
 pointed perhaps to a relationship with a wealthy
 gangster like Neil Vamen, who was going to have a

lot more cash than most of the punters she'd ever been with. The question was whether he cared for her enough to kill a possible love rival like Shaun Matthews.

However, once again she wasn't responding as I pressed the buzzer on the flashy-looking intercom system for the third time.

'What do we do now?' asked Benin eventually.

What all coppers have to get used to doing/ I told him. 'Wait.'

'She might have gone away. We could be waiting for days.'

'Look, Dave, I'm not driving back out here again, and I'm not phoning her and giving her advance notice of us turning up just in case she's got some Jung to hide, so, for the moment at least, we're going to stay put.'

'But even if she is Vamen's girlfriend, where does that leave us?' he asked, leaning back against the wall of the porch. 'We don't even know if she was seeing Matthews. And where does Fowler fit into it?'

'I don't know is the short answer,' I said, thinking that he had a point. 'But at least we can hear what she has to say. If Vamen's got something to do with it, and if she thought more of Matthews than he deserved, then maybe she's feeling bad about it, and we may be able to get her to talk.'

Benin nodded wearily. 'Fair enough. Shall we go and get a cup of tea from somewhere while we wait? I need to rehydrate.'

'Were you out again last night?' I asked him in vaguely disgusted tones. I think I was jealous. He

told me he was. Out drinking in the West End with -- one of the station's more attractive WPCs. He started telling me all about it, but I couldn't handle that, not after a night alone in front of an excruciating edition of *Celebrity Stars in their Eyes*, so, on a whim, I pressed the buzzer below Jean's. Three seconds later a none-too-youthful male voice came on the line. I told him who we were, pointing my warrant card at the camera above our heads, and asked if we could come up.

'Of course,' he said, sounding interested.

We were greeted at the top of the stairs by a very short gentleman in his early seventies who had a very wide head that was far too big for his spindly body, giving him more than a passing resemblance to ET. He had large amounts of fine white hair, tinged with orange bits, and big black heavy-rimmed glasses. A taller lady, about ten years younger, with a tent-like flowery dress on, stood behind him. They both smiled as we approached.

'Good morning,' said the man, as we produced our warrant cards. 'We're the Lackers. Peter and Margaret.' He shook our hands formally with a surprisingly firm grip.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' said Margaret Lacker with an easy smile.

'Yes, thanks, that'd be nice,' I said, wishing there were more people I dealt with like the Lackers. Polite, accommodating, and not totally pissed off to see you.

They led us into their richly decorated apartment and motioned for us to sit down in their lounge, a place that looked more like a drawing room of old.

'So, how can we help you?' asked Peter Lacker, sitting down in a chair opposite. 'I hope there's nothing wrong/

'Nothing at all,' I said, smiling. 'We're just interested in one of your neighbours, a Miss Jean Tanner. I understand she lives on this floor.'

That's right. Next door. She's all right, isn't she?

'I certainly hope so. We need to speak to her in .i. inflection with a matter she might have some information on.' Suitably vague, I thought. 'We called yesterday but she wasn't at home and she doesn't appear to be at home now. Do you know if she's gone away anywhere?'

'I don't think so. She was definitely there last night We heard her.'

i leard her?'

He looked a bit embarrassed. 'Jean's a good neighbour, don't get me wrong, please, but she does have male visitors and sometimes she can have disagreements with them. There were some loud voices last night.'

'What? Like an argument?'

He nodded.

'How many people were involved?' asked Berrin.

'Just two of them. Jean and someone else. A man. I didn't immediately recognize the voice.'

'She's not in trouble, is she?' asked Mrs Lacker, coming in with a tray containing a china teapot, four puny-sized china cups and a selection of what looked like custard creams.

I smiled reassuringly as she sat down in a chair

next to her husband. 'Not at all, but it is important

we speak to her. You haven't seen her this morning, then?' They both shook their heads. 'How violent was this argument you heard last night?'

'It wasn't violent as such/' said Mr Lacker. 'It was just quite loud.'

'It didn't last that long either, did it?' added his wife, passing me a cup. 'Jean tends to keep herself to herself. She's not a difficult neighbour at all. Is she, Peter?'

'No, not at all. She's lived here for a long time. Three or four years, I think.'

I asked them how often she received male visitors but they were vague on this. Now and again, said Mr Lacker, adding that he and his wife were sexually liberal and so of course didn't disapprove of such arrangements, which as far as I was concerned was one detail too many. They were also vague on how often Jean had had violent disagreements with said visitors. Mr Lacker backtracked somewhat on his earlier statement and said not very often at all. Mrs Lacker said she couldn't remember the last time before the previous night.

I couldn't help feeling vaguely concerned about what I was hearing. I took a sip from my tea and put the cup down. 'I'd like to try her flat again, if I may/' I said, standing up. Benin, who was munching on one of the custard creams, followed suit with only limited enthusiasm. It looked like he'd been enjoying his sitdown. 'Can you show me which one it is, Mr Lacker?'

'Of course/' he answered, and led us back out into the hallway. He pointed to a door at the far end. 'That's it.'

I stepped past him with Benin following and knocked hard on the door. Nothing. I waited a few moments, then tried again. If she was in there, she would definitely be able to hear me. I put my ear against the door and listened to the silence. I tried the handle but it was locked. Then I had an idea. A highly irregular one, but on a day like this I wasn't going to be fussy. 'Have you got a key to Miss Tanner's flat, Mr Lacker?'

'I have/ he said, "but I'm not sure I should be--'

'I have reason to believe that something might have happened to her,' I told him, 'and I need to see if this is the case or not. To do that, I need access to her flat. You can come in with us if you want to satisfy yourself that we're not doing anything in there that we shouldn't be.'

'Oh dear,' he said. 'I'd better go and get it.'

He turned and went back inside and Benin looked at me quizzically. 'Don't worry/ I whispered. I know what I'm doing.' Which of course were famous last words if ever I'd heard them.

A few seconds later, Mr Lacker emerged with the key in his hand and a worried-looking Mrs Lacker in tow. 'The do hope everything's all right/ she said to me. 'She always seemed such a nice young lady.'

'I'm sure it's nothing/ I said, taking hold of the key, 'But I think it's best to stay on the safe side.' With everyone crowded behind me, I turned the key in the lock and slowly pushed open the door.

The layout was different to the Lackers' place and the door opened directly into a spacious lounge with an open-plan, newish-looking kitchen

to the right. A wide-screen plasma TV hung from '1B the wall in front of two expensive-looking leather m sofas, and the whole effect was very minimalist but "*J also very tasteful. It also looked very unlived in. L There were no dirty cups or dishes and the large * glass ashtray on the coffee table in the centre of the L room was clean and empty. And no evidence at all of a row.

'Well, she's not short of a few bob/ said Benin, looking round admiringly at the furnishings, par- " ticularly the TV. ^

'She never said what she did for a living/ said Mrs Lacker, who had come in behind us. Her & husband, meanwhile, hung back in the doorway. L 'It's very nice, isn't it Peter?'

Peter nodded. 'I expect that kitchen cost a pretty penny/ he said. 'Those are granite worktops in there. They cost a fortune.'

Berrin looked across at me, presumably for '* guidance as to what to do next, now that we were f in the place. The problem was, I wasn't sure. I'd hoped there might be some clues to her whereabouts lying about - not that I was quite sure what i - but there was nothing. It looked like the apart- f ment had been cleaned from top to bottom - a slightly worrying sign in itself.

To our left, a short hallway ran down to the rest of the apartment. 'Let's take a look down here/ I | said. Berrin looked at me like he wanted to say * something but was unable to do so because of the presence of the Lackers. I knew what it would be as , well. Something along the lines of What the hell i are we doing here and what would a defence I

lawyer have to say about it?' A good point, but I'd worry about that one later.

'I've never been in here before/' said Mrs Lacker, wandering into the kitchen area and looking up at the metallic pots and pans hanging there. 'It's very nice/'

'Don't touch anything, please/' I told her. 'Either of you/'

We started off down the hallway. Mr Lacker meanwhile remained standing in the door, looking around with just a hint of suspicion, as if he too was trying to work out what Jean Tanner did for a living and how she'd managed to accumulate such pricey belongings. It looked like he was jumping to correct finclusions, and was perhaps realizing that he wasn't as sexually liberal as he'd previously thought.

There was a bathroom on our left with the door slightly ajar. I pushed it open with the key while Benin stepped past. I noticed that two toothbrushes were out on the sink and the lid was off the toothpaste - not that any of that was much use. The shower, however, had been used quite recently, certainly that morning. The curtain was damp and there were still drops of water in the bath tub.

I stepped back out of the bathroom and saw Benin, who'd put on gloves, opening the door to one of the bedrooms. At the same time he removed another of the Lackers' custard creams from his pocket and began munching it surreptitiously.

I followed him into the bedroom, conscious that Mrs Lacker was coming up behind me, doubtless for more of a nose about. I was just turning round

to tell her to stay back when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Benin stop in front of an imposing dressing-room cupboard at the end of the double bed, and pull a face. He started to say something but his mouth was full of custard cream and it came out like gibberish. And then, the next second, he was opening the door.

There was an immediate crash as the naked corpse came tumbling stiffly out, arms at its sides, like something out of *The Mummy Returns*. It smacked straight into Benin, who let out a high-pitched howl, spitting crumbs everywhere, and fell back on the bed with it on top of him. I yelled too, and jumped back as he instinctively shoved it away from him, unfortunately in my direction. It bounced loudly against the corner of the cupboard, then came crashing down by my feet, face upwards, and right in the doorway. Mrs Lacker saw it immediately, let out the biggest scream of the lot, then put her hand on her face and fainted dramatically, hitting her head on the bathroom door as she fell backwards.

'What's going on?' yelled Mr Lacker, running over to his wife.

'Stay back!' I shouted. 'Don't touch anything! This is a murder scene!'

Then I looked across at Benin, whose hair was now standing on end. His face was as white as a ghost's and he was staring off into space. 'Oh my God,' he kept saying, over and over again.

I looked down at the blank dead eyes gazing up at me, then at the familiar tattoos on the upper and lower arms. A Chinese dragon on the left, a military

emblem on the right. 'Shit/ I said as I stared down at the corpse of Craig McBride and wondered why on earth he should be lying dead in the apartment of a woman he was not even meant to know.

I called Capper from the Lackers' apartment, where Mr Lacker was mopping Mrs Lacker's brow with a damp cloth, while Berrin sat bolt upright in his original chair, sipping the tea Mrs Lacker had poured him five minutes and one cuddle from a corpse ago. He didn't look too good, which was hardly surprising.

Capper answered on about the tenth ring and I told him what had happened. 'What the hell was ..'.Bride doing in her flat?' he demanded, as if it was somehow my fault.

'I don't know.'

'And there's no sign of her anywhere?'

'Nothing that I can see.'

'Have you touched anything in there?'

'No, we've secured the scene, but you're the first person I've called.'

'Any indication how he died?'

'Well, there was no blood but I didn't really look too closely. Put it this way, he was all right this time yesterday so, whatever it is, I wouldn't think it's natural causes.'

'All right, wait where you are and make sure no one contaminates the scene. What's the address?'

I gave it to him, said my goodbyes, and put down the phone. I looked over at the Lackers. Mrs Lacker appeared to be coming back to earth. 'It was horrible,' she said as her husband continued to dab

her brow. 'Something like that in a respectable neighbourhood like this.'

'I know this is a difficult question, but did you *L happen to recognize the deceased? Is he someone a*K you've seen here before?' J|

Mrs Lacker gasped melodramatically as if I'd just W asked for her bust measurements. 'I don't know, I L didn't see. All I remember was him falling into the doorway and then ... And then, that's it.' She -- finished the sentence with another gasp and her H head fell back on the seat. Jf_

Mr Lacker,' I said. ~t

He shook his head. 'I didn't see either. I was too * busy looking after Margaret.'

That wasn't what I was going to ask. I know it's . not going to be easy but I'd appreciate it if you ~ could come in with me, view the deceased, and let ^ me know whether you've ever seen him here * before. It could prove very helpful.' If

What do you think's happened to Jean?' asked ? Mrs Lacker worriedly.

'I don't know,' I said, thinking that I wouldn't mind an answer to that question as well. 'Mr Lacker?' He nodded and stood up. 'Dave, you stay here and look after Mrs Lacker. OK?'

Benin nodded, beginning to look slightly healthier now. 'Sure.'

I led Mr Lacker back into Jean's apartment, again reminding him not to touch anything, and walked back through the darkened hallway to where the body lay. Mr Lacker paused a few feet behind me, and put his hand against the wall to steady himself. 'It's so stifling in here, isn't it?' he said, sounding

breathless. 'I don't know how you can do this sort of thing every day, I really don't. I've got nothing but admiration for you/

'It's not an everyday occurrence, thank goodness/ I told him, thinking that it was a rare day anyone said they were full of admiration for me. 'If it was, I don't think I'd be able to handle it.' And I wasn't sure if I would have been. The longer you're in the job, the more you become hardened to the horrors around you, but the sight of Craig McBride's stiff, lifeless body, sucked dry of personality, of everything, depressed me in a way I find difficult to describe. Particularly as the previous civic I'd been holding a conversation with him. It might not have been a very pleasant one, but that was hardly the point. He'd been alive, now he was gone. Permanently.

I stepped out of the way so Mr Lacker could see Craig's face. He looked quickly, then looked away, still standing a few feet back. Take your time,' I told him. There's no hurry.'

He stayed where he was for a couple of seconds, then steeled himself, took a couple of steps forward, and looked again. 'Yes, I've seen him before,' he said, turning away. 'On two or three occasions.'

Thank you for that/ I said, leading him back towards the front door.

At that moment, there was a commotion from outside, the front door opened, and a giant of a man about ten years my senior, dressed in an ill-fitting black suit, stepped inside. 'What the hell's going on?' he barked. This is a crime scene. Who are you?'

'I'm DS John Gallan/ I said, stopping in front of m him. 'And this is Peter Lacker, the neighbour.' J*

'Well, I'm DI Burley and I'm taking over from here. ' And you two are contaminating a crime scene. Have ** you touched anything?' Z

'No.' |

'Well, get out then. SOCO are going to be here in "7 a few minutes and we've got to seal everything off.'

He motioned bluntly towards the door with his head, and we stepped past him into the hall where ' several uniformed officers were standing. Burley followed us out. After I'd led Mr Lacker back into ~ his own flat, he put a large, hairy hand on my shoulder and half-pushed me over to the top of the ; stairs. I was going to tell him that as far as I was aware we were on the same side, so he could ease up if he liked on the tough-guy routine, but I never got the chance. He was talking before my lips even parted.

'What were you doing back in there with the neighbour? Seeing if you could fuck up the crime scene as much as possible? Have you forgotten what the procedures are, or did you just never \ bother to learn them?' v

'Did you get out of bed the wrong side or are you always this charming?'

I thought he was going to pick me up then and chuck me down the stairs. I'm not a small bloke - | I'm close to six feet tall - but there was no 1 questioning the fact that he could have managed it. His sharp little eyes, by far the daintiest features on his long, heavy-jawed face, blazed angrily. That's L another thing you obviously haven't learnt then, |

that a DI's a superior officer to a DS and therefore a DS should speak to a DI with a measure of fucking respect, and address him as sir. And apologize when he fucking forgets that.' His words were spoken in a loud hiss through teeth that looked like they usually spent their time gritted, and whether I liked it or not (and I didn't, I can assure you), what he was saying was correct. I took solace in the fact that a man as rude, angry and clearly stressed as DI Burley was not going to live to a ripe old age, surrounded by loving relatives hanging on to his every word of wisdom.

'I was just doing my job, sir/ I told him, emphasizing the sir. I held his gaze, knowing that the only way a person gets intimidated is if he lets himself. I'u done way too many miles for that to happen.

'Well, you're not doing very fucking well. So, I understand you know who the corpse is, is that right?'

That's right. His name's Craig McBride. We spoke to him yesterday in connection with a murder.'

'But he doesn't live here?'

'No, the apartment belongs to a Jean Tanner. We came here to see her, but she wasn't here. He was.'

'What were you interested in her for?'

I explained what we knew in short, sullen sentences, giving him more of an overview of the Matthews case than the bastard deserved. As I was finishing, Benin came over to join us. Burley turned round and saw him. 'What the fuck's wrong with you?' he said. 'Tou look like you've seen a ghost. Not used to stiffs, then?'

Tm all right/ said Benin belligerently.

'Well, I want you both to know that we're taking over this case now. This is our patch and we're investigating it. Thanks very much for alerting us to yet another fucking suspicious death in the division, but we won't be needing any more help from you. So, if you'll excuse us ...'

'Hold on,' I said, ignoring the murderous glare he shot me. 'We need to speak to Miss Tanner regarding the Shaun Matthews murder case. If s important. Sir.'

'When we locate her, Sergeant, you'll be given the necessary access to question her about your own case, if you follow the procedures. Now, we're very fucking busy so I'd like it if you could be on your way before you mess anything else up. I'll inform your superiors when and if we have her in custody.'

Td also like access to the results of the postmortem on McBride.'

'You'll get the information when we have it,' he said. 'Now, goodbye.' He turned and stalked back towards the open door of Jean's apartment, leaving the two of us standing there like lemons.

Sometimes you genuinely wonder why you bother. When even your own people don't seem to want to help you, then you really are kicking a lead door. I've met plenty of coppers like Burley - far too many, if the truth be told - and, like him, they're generally the older guys with too many years on the Force who've never quite done as well as they think their talents deserve, and who hold a grudge because of it. They're also the ones who are most

prone to corruption. I wondered briefly whether there was more to Hurley's eagerness to get us off the premises than he was letting on. It also seemed strange that he'd got here so fast. As if he'd been waiting just round the corner.

'Where to now?' asked Benin with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

I sighed, forcing down the frustration. When one avenue fails, try another one. 'Let's go and see Neil Vamen,' I told him.

'Are you sure this is a good idea, Sarge?' said Benin. He still looked sick. Sick and nervous.

It was twelve-thirty and we were walking towards the Seven Bells, a pub in Barnsbury which, according to the profile we had on him, was supposedly the Sunday lunchtime haunt of Neil Vamen. The place, no doubt, where he felt most at home among 'his people'. Barnsbury, the traditionally working-class, now partly gentrified district of south Islington that encompasses the area between the Caledonian and Liverpool Roads north of Pentonville, was in many way the spiritual home of the Holtz organization, since it was there that all the senior members had grown up and plotted their first scams together. Most had long since moved out to larger, more ostentatious properties in the suburbs, including Vamen, but he apparently still retained a special affection for the area, not least because his mother still lived there, and he visited regularly.

It probably wasn't a good idea to go and see him. After all, I didn't expect him suddenly to blurt out

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everything he knew about the death of Shaun Matthews and Craig McBride, as well as the whereabouts of his alleged girlfriend, Jean Tanner. As Benin had pointed out more than once this morning, he might have known nothing about any of it, but I wasn't so sure. Jean had been linked to him by a man who was now dead. She'd been seeing another man who was also now dead. At least one of those deaths, and almost certainly both, were not from natural causes, and now Jean was missing. I didn't have any particular theory of what Vamen's involvement might be, it was still too early for that, but at least by turning up out of the blue we might be able to rattle him. Particularly if he thought we knew more than we actually did.

'I don't honestly know if it's a good idea or not but I don't see any alternative. I mean, who else is there left to talk to? We've got a murder inquiry where everyone we want to interview is either missing or dead. Have you thought about that? Fowler's nowhere to be seen, McBride talks, then twenty-four hours later he's dead, and now Jean Tanner's disappeared into thin air. At least Vamen's still capable of opening his mouth.'

'I'm not criticizing, Sarge, but don't you think we ought to have checked it out with Capper first?'

'Look, this is just a friendly little chat, following up on a lead. We're just using some initiative, that's all.'

We stopped outside the pub, a small, old fashioned place with grimy windows and a battered door that fitted in snugly in the quiet, slightly run-down street of terraced housing just off I

the southern end of the Caledonian Road. The windows were open and we could hear the steady buzz of conversation and the occasional clinking of glasses. It's a sound I usually like because it's welcoming, but I had a feeling the welcome here wasn't going to get much above frosty. We'd both taken off our jackets in deference to the intense midday heat but now put them on again. It was best to be formal.

Till do the talking/ I said, thinking that at that moment Benin looked like a student in a suit at his first job interview. 'You just stand up straight and don't look too queasy.'

'They're not likely to try to rough us up, are they?' he asked, showing a worrying naivety. Sometimes I couldn't help but think that it was only the shortage of detectives in the Met that had put Benin in plain clothes, and that he'd been promoted above his experience. In the fight against crime, you didn't like to think that the front line was made up of too many men like him.

'He might be a nasty bastard, Dave, but he's still a businessman. He won't want to do anything that brings him unwanted attention. Now, come on.'

I stepped inside with Berrin following. The interior was deceptively large and seemed to go back a long way, as is often the way with London pubs. It was split into two bars, the right-hand one near enough empty except for a handful of old geezers in caps smoking pipes and generally not taking too much notice of one another. Two of them were playing cribbage and they were the only ones who looked up as we arrived.

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The other bar, in contrast, was a lot younger and j a fair bit livelier, although it was still early so ,1 nowhere near crowded. A jukebox played one of the numerous covers of the Righteous Brothers' IUnchained Melody⁷ and three or four groups of people - mainly men, but some women - milled about in a way that suggested they all knew one another. Most of them were in their thirties and forties, and at the far end of the bar, closely watched by Jack Merriweather and two powerfully built bodyguards, stood Neil Vamen. He was talking to another of the groups - two middle-aged men and their younger, pneumatic blonde partners - who were hanging on to his every word. Vamen was smiling broadly and I got the feeling he was telling : a joke.

That all stopped as soon as we stepped inside. In fact, everything stopped, bar the music, the singer continuing to warble boringly while the whole bar gave us what I can only describe as the evil eye. I suppose we just looked like coppers. The barman studiously ignored us and for a couple of seconds I simply stood there, thinking that it might actually have been a big mistake coming here.

Confidence. It's all about confidence. You can command the respect of anyone, even a room full of gangsters, if you walk like you know the walk. So, trying to ignore the fact that I was sweating, I ambled casually through the crowd, Benin behind me, and stopped when I reached Neil Vamen. His bodyguards tensed but made no move. Jackie Slap's lip curled in an expression of distaste, as if the very presence of police officers caused him to

experience an allergic reaction, which it probably did. Vamen, meanwhile, eyed me with a mixture of mild contempt and idle curiosity, his turquoise eyes twinkling playfully. I could almost feel the stares of every other person in the place on my back, and I hoped Benin didn't do anything stupid, like faint.

'Hello, Mr Vamen. My name's DS Gallan and this is DC Benin.' I produced my warrant card and saw out of the corner of my eye Berrin produce his. 'I believe we've met before.'

Vamen made a casual gesture. 'I don't remember.'

'We'd like a word with you in private, if we may.'

'No.'

And that was that. The word wasn't delivered rudely but there was a finality about it I really should have expected. Behind me, I heard one of the pneumatic blondes snigger.

'Any particular reason why not?'

He smiled. 'Because I've got nothing to say to you.'

It's difficult when you rely on the authority that comes with your position to coerce people into doing things, and then come up against someone who has no fear of it or you. Particularly when they're on their home territory and you're a long way from yours.

'If you don't talk to me, I might have to conclude that you've got something to hide,' I told him, meeting his gaze.

That made him laugh. 'Your lot have been concluding that for the past twenty years.' Further laughter reverberated around the bar, and someone shouted, 'You tell him, Neil.'

'Ain't you got nothing better to do?' sneered the Slap. He was wearing a black New York Yankees baseball cap to cover up what he hadn't got. I ignored him. At that point, I didn't have to be told that I was losing this one.

Tine. We'll talk here, then. Your girlfriend, Jean Tanner. We found a man dead in her apartment and we want to know where she is. Any ideas?'

Vamen's face hardened and his eyes lost their playfulness. For two, maybe three seconds the silence was deafening. When he spoke next, his voice was calm and slow, but dripping with menace. 'I don't know what you're fucking talking about, or where you're getting your information from, but I'm telling you this: it's bollocks. Now, you want to discuss anything with me, you go through my lawyer. His name's Melvyn Carroll. You might have heard of him.' I had. The Holtz family brief. As crooked as a busted rib. 'Otherwise, unless you're arresting me - which you're not, are you?' He paused for a moment to let me answer.

'Not at the moment/

'Well, then, unless you're arresting me, you can fuck off out of here and leave me alone. And if you don't, DS Gallan ... is that right? Gall-an?'

'Gallon of what?' some wag called out.

'That's right, John Gallan,' I said, determined to hold my own.

'And what's your name again, sonny?' He aimed the full force of his personality at Benin, who was probably now wishing he'd taken the advice of his university careers adviser and joined an insurance company.

'We've already told you who we are/ I said.

'Benin, wasn't it?' he said, ignoring me and eyeing him closely, like he was probing for signs of weakness, and doubtless unearthing many. 'Well, DS John Gallan and DC Benin, if you harass me like this again with no good reason, and I can tell you now you do not have a good fucking reason, then my brief will be paying your superior a visit, and he will then be kicking your flimsy little arses for upsetting a well-established local businessman instead of doing what you're paid to do, which is catching fucking criminals, of whom there are plenty a-fucking-bout. Do I make myself clear?'

'That you don't want to co-operate with us? Yes, you do. Crystal.'

He gave me a look like I was something annoying stuck between his teeth, then turned his back. At the same time one of his bodyguards, who was a good four inches taller and probably a foot wider than me, stepped between us and stared blankly down at the top of my head. The other one then joined him, forming a wall that effectively blocked off all contact. Jackie Slap stayed where he was, a nasty grin on his face. I could have tried to push them out of the way. hassle Vamen a bit more, let him know I wasn't fazed, but in the end there was no point. He had the run of me and he knew it. I knew it, too. The important thing now was to find Jean. Then, possibly, we could move forward. For now, the meeting was over and I had to work hard to overcome the sense of impotence I felt in the sure knowledge that Neil Vamen was a criminal and a murderer who'd become rich by ignoring the laws

I was supposed to uphold, who could pay my mortgage off a hundred times over, and yet, when it came to a confrontation between the two of us, he was the one who held all the cards. Some people say there's no justice in the world. If they say it in front of me, I tell them they're wrong, that the bad almost always get what they deserve in the end, even if the wait's long. But at that moment in time, standing in a room where everyone was revelling in our powerlessness, I didn't really believe it.

'Gentleman gangster, my arse,' I said in Vamen's general direction. I looked up at the wall of flesh in front of me. 'And you need to change your aftershave, mate.' Puerile, but at least it made me feel a bit better. Like I'd salvaged something from the wreckage of this meeting.

Jackie Slap continued to grin, but I resisted addressing him by the name he allegedly hated. It would have reeked too much of desperation. Instead, I turned on my heel and motioned for

Benin to lead us out of there. He bumped into one of the blondes who'd deliberately positioned herself in front of him, and mumbled some sort of apology. She, for her own part, made some snide comment regarding the poor quality of his eyesight, which he ignored. She started to say something to me but I told her not to bother and kept walking, trying hard to ignore the catcalls and victory whoops that accompanied our exit.

On the four-hundred-yard walk back to the car through the terraced backstreets of Barnsbury, we didn't speak once. When we finally reached it, I looked across at Benin, who still didn't look too

good. I couldn't blame him. It had been a shit day all round. 'Are you all right?' I asked him.

'I don't know/ he said, leaning against the bonnet. 'I think I might be coming down with something.'

Berrin wasn't the hardest worker in the world and he'd already had several short bouts of sick leave in the few months he'd been with CID, but this time I wasn't going to begrudge him. 'Come on/ I said. 'I'll take you home.'

He didn't argue.

Two hours later I was still trying hard to keep a lid on my frustration but it wasn't working. The humiliation of the meeting with Vamen, combined with the heat and the knowledge that nothing about the Shaun Matthews case was going right, including the way I was handling it, was serving to sever the last threads of my patience. I just knew that right now my ex-wife would be sat in the garden, the one I'd helped pay for, soaking up some rays alongside the man who had gone out of his way to wreck my life, while my daughter played happily in front of them, maybe even fetching him a nice cool beer to enjoy while he worked out whose balloon he was going to burst next. And the thing was, I could have handled it. I could have handled pretty much anything if I'd thought that by putting in all these extra hours on the job, hours I'd been putting in since I was eighteen years old, I was actually getting somewhere. But it just wasn't happening. For every weak, staggering step forward we took, there always seemed to be a larger,

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more confident one backwards. And now I had to |f deal with an idiot like Capper, who seemed in- f capable of providing the remotest bit of help.

'We need to be involved, sir. We interviewed the dead man yesterday and it was his testimony that led us to the flat today.'

Capper sat back in his chair, trying hard to look like he was sympathetic to my plight. The act didn't work. Till have to talk to the DCI about it, John, and that's going to be tomorrow now. I don't want to bother him at home. Not over this.'

'With due respect, I think it's important. I feel certain that this man's death is linked to that of Shaun Matthews, and therefore--'

Capper raised his arms and waved them from side to side like opposing windscreen wipers, an , annoying habit of his indicating silence to the individual being gestured at, in this case me. I forced myself to fall silent. 'John, it's DI Burley's patch, so at the moment it's his investigation. There's nothing I can do about that. We'll certainly be able to liaise with them if there's a consensus that the two cases are linked.'

'Which they've basically got to be.'

Capper nodded noncommittally. 'There's definitely a possibility there.'

Tvlore than a possibility. Two bouncers from the same nightclub, whose owner's been missing for days, both murdered within a week of each other.'

'Are we sure McBride's was murder?'

'Definitely. He was OK yesterday. For all we

know, it could even be the same poison that killed Matthews.'

'Could be, John, could be. But it's also possible that it's natural causes.'

'How? He was in a cupboard.'

'We've just got to wait and see what the autopsy reveals. What we'll do is discuss what happened at the meeting tomorrow morning and then maybe the DCI'll get on the phone to their nick and see if there's any scope for information sharing. In the meantime, you need to bring all the records up to date. Where's Berrin, by the way?'

'I took him home. He was feeling sick.'

'Again. That's the third time since he's been in CID. What's wrong with him this time?'

'I don't know, summer flu or something. He's been a bit under the weather these past few days/ I jucci.

Capper nodded with some scepticism, an annoyingly serene smile on his face. 'Well, let's hope he gets better soon,' he said, sounding like he didn't mean it at all.

'Is that everything, sir?' I asked, starting to get to my feet. I couldn't hack any more of Capper than I had to.

'Not quite, John,' he answered, still wearing the smile. It made him look like a brain-damaged Buddhist. I stopped mid-crouch and waited for him to continue. 'I got a call this afternoon from a Mr Melvyn Carroll. He says that you and DC Berrin were harassing his client, Neil Vamen. What on earth were you doing talking to Vamen?'

'He's a possible suspect in the Matthews case/ I said, sitting back down.

'Let me get this right. A man with a lengthy

It
criminal record, now deceased, suggested that *'

Vamen was the boyfriend of a woman who visited the home of Shaun Matthews, and was possibly,
just possibly, Matthews's girlfriend as well, and this
makes him a suspect?'

'Yes, it does. He's certainly a possibility, so he
was worth talking to.'

'Neil Vamen. I trust you know who he is?'

Tes, and that's another reason to consider him a
suspect. He's got the resources and the ruthlessness
to kill Shaun Matthews and Craig McBride.'

'He's also someone who's had years of practice in
knowing how to cover his tracks, so he was never
going to talk to you. Even if he is involved, which I
doubt, because I don't think he's the type to get
sentimental about a woman, it's going to be
extremely difficult to prove anything.'

That doesn't mean we shouldn't try.'

The point is, Vamen's a big fish and it's SO7
and the NCS who are responsible for building
prosecution cases against him and his associates.
They're not going to take kindly to you throwing
your weight about with him. I thought you were
meant to be talking to SO7 about the case.'

'I am. I'm waiting for a call back from Asif Malik.'

'Well, go that route, then.'

'Look, I was doing the right thing--'

The arms started swinging from side to side
again and once more I forced myself to button it.
'You're a good copper, John/ he said, talking to me
like I was an office junior rather than one rank and

only a handful of years below him, 'and we're all
pleased with your progress here, but don't start to

get ahead of yourself. You'll end up causing problems both for yourself and for CID. Understand?'

I sighed, knowing that he was right and that it was a mistake to go to see Vamen, but longing for the moment when I was a DI again and didn't have to report to him. /Yes/ sir/ I said reluctantly.

'In future I don't want you going to see Neil Vamen or any of his associates without speaking to me about it first. OK? I don't want to sound like I'm not supporting you, but I think it's the best way.'

I nodded, but didn't bother responding. The conversation over, I stalked back to my desk and began the torturous task of bringing everything up to date. Only once did Capper interrupt me, to ask if we were still trying to get hold of Fowler. I said that ,, e were but that we were still having no luck.

'He's the one we've got to concentrate on/ he said, nodding his head as if he was agreeing with himself - another of his annoying habits, most likely brought about by the fact that no-one else did. I didn't bother to comment.

At exactly five o'clock, Capper left for the day, telling me helpfully that I shouldn't work too hard. 'You need to unwind sometimes/ he said with another irritating smile. That way it won't all get on top of you.'

I didn't bother telling him that it was a little too late for that. Instead, I put my head down and felt glad for the opportunity of some space and quiet.

Paperwork can be a therapeutic process. It's repetitive and it's mundane, but when there's plenty of it to do, the person doing it can sometimes

lift himself spiritually from the pile in front of him and reach an almost Zen-like state where the hand simply writes automatically and the brain sails away to calmer, happier waters where there are no interruptions and no will-sapping and pointless confrontations.

I'd reached that point and was probably wearing a serene smile as idiotic as Capper's when the door to the incident room opened and WDC Boyd walked in. Now, I liked Boyd. She was my kind of woman: attractive, amusing, but definitely no push-over. We got on well, too. I think that if it hadn't been for the fact that we worked together, I would have definitely fancied her, and might even have tried my luck - not that I tended to have a great deal of it where love was concerned. She appeared to be a bit worn out and hot, but her short black hair, cut into a cute bob, looked like it had come straight out of a cheesy shampoo ad, and her grey trousersuit was spotless. For a woman who'd been out tramping the dirty, sweating streets of London, she carried herself remarkably well.

It was ten past six. She smiled, looking genuinely pleased to see me. 'Hello, John, you still around?'

'I could ask the same question/ I said, looking up. 'Did you manage to get hold of John Harris?'

'Ah, the elusive Mr Harris, former stud of the Arcadia. I found him all right/ she said, sighing theatrically. 'Eventually.'

'And?'

She wandered over and sat on her desk a few yards away from mine. 'And, I don't think he's our man.'

'Why not?'

'Because he's been in hospital for the past ten days. He was working the door at a place in Clapham on their garage night and he got caught in the crossfire of somebody else's argument.'

'That's south London for you.'

Too right. It's bandit country down there/ she added, winking at me. 'Anyway, he got shot in the stomach. Apparently the bullet passed straight through him and hit one of the glass collectors inside. That was three days before Matthews was murdered. What a waste of a day. It took me more than four hours to find that out when I could have been sat out in the park sunbathing.'

I almost said that that would be a sight I . v'ouldn't have minded seeing, but settled instead for a cliché, That's the way it goes sometimes, Tina.'

She took off her jacket and turned on her PC.
'How was your day anyway?'

I grunted. 'I think I can safely say it was probably even worse than yours.' I gave her a detailed rundown of all the disasters that had befallen Benin and me since we'd arrived for work that morning. She laughed when she heard about his slow dance with McBride's corpse but her look had turned to sympathy by the time I'd finished.

'Blimey, John, you don't mess about, do you?
Marching in and interrogating Neil Vamen?'

I sighed and shook my head. 'It was a stupid move. You know, I was thinking this morning how naïve Benin was in the way he dealt with people, but I was far more naïve than him over this. I really

thought I could rattle Vamen, but in the end I've * achieved absolutely nothing, except maybe to alert * him to the fact that I might know something about what's going on. And he's already made a preemptive strike to get me off his back.'

'You did your best/ she said, giving me a '*' supportive smile. 'Which is a lot more than a few of the people round here.'

'Well, it didn't work,' I said, feeling sorry for myself.

'So, what do you think happened? What's your theory on Matthews and McBride?'

I'd thought about that a fair amount that day but had yet to come up with anything concrete. 'I don't know, Tina. If I had to indulge in a bit of conjecture ~ I'd say that Jean Tanner was Neil Vamen's mistress and that she was also seeing Matthews on the side. Vamen found out about what was going on and had Matthews killed.' t

'And what about McBride?'

'This is where it starts not to make much sense. From what the neighbours were saying, McBride had visited Jean on a number of occasions, so it makes me think that maybe he was seeing her as well.'

'So she was seeing three of them? She gets around a bit.'

I shrugged. 'Well, that's what it looks like.' i;

'And you think Vamen found out about McBride f as well?'

I spread my arms wide in a gesture of defeat. 'I don't know.'

'Because that all seems a bit coincidental, doesn't |

it? Him killing off two of his love rivals in the space of a week. All over one woman who's hardly a picture painting, is she?'

'You know what they say/ I said lamely. 'Love's blind.'

'Not that blind.'

'I don't think I've ever come across a murder case as complicated as this one. One where nothing seems to really lead anywhere. Do you know what I mean? There's no logic in any of it. I mean, what about Fowler? If he's got nothing to do with it, then where is he?' There followed a long silence. We were a long way from any answers. 'You know,' I said eventually, 'it's been such a long day, I can't even be bothered to think about it any more.'

'Do you want to go for a drink? Finish up here and grab a beer somewhere?'

I pondered her suggestion for all of one second. The paperwork could wait. 'Why not? I could do with one.'

We wandered round the corner to the Roving Wolf and I ordered the first round: a pint of Pride for me, a pint of Fosters for her. That was another thing I liked about Boyd, she didn't have any airs and graces. She might have been a college girl like Benin but she was still one of the lads. The interior of the pub was quiet at this hour with most of the hardened drinkers and passing trade sat at tables outside on the street, so we found ourselves a table away from the bright rays of evening sunshine streaming through the windows and chatted a while, enjoying the fact that the working day was over and there was nothing and no-one to

m pressurize us. She bought the second round and I *

realized I was enjoying things just a little too much. She was good company, and single, too. I couldn't help but think that maybe I ought to make an exception to the rule I'd placed on myself never to " have an office fling. That had been after an affair I'd 7 had with another WDC ten years earlier, when Rachel had been little more than a baby and I'd been getting the married man's yearning for something new. It had all got very messy. The WDC had < demanded I choose between Cathy and her, and I'd done the inevitable and chosen Cathy. The atmos- " phere between the WDC and me, and in CID as a whole, where everyone knew what had been going , on, had been sour for more than a year afterwards * until she'd finally asked for a transfer and got it, much to my relief. I might not have been married any more but I still thought it best to keep to the rule, remembering all too well the hassle of having > "*" to work with someone you'd pay good money to avoid.

So when Boyd asked if I fancied grabbing a curry somewhere, I was pretty torn. But with the grim memories of the previous night and Celebrity Stars % in their Eyes still fresh in my mind, I concluded that life was definitely too short to say no. Boyd suggested a curryhouse she liked down near King's Cross station and, while I would have preferred the | continental ambience of Upper Street to the dodgier | end of the Euston Road, I didn't make a fuss. To be * ; fair to her, I ended up pleased with the choice. The food was good, which I suppose it would have to | be given its location, and I found myself relaxing in 1

a way I hadn't in female company for a long time.

As they cleared away the remains of the food, I told her about Capper's reaction to my mention of Heavenly Girls. 'Do you think he's been paying recreational visits down there? He definitely knew the place.'

She pulled a face. 'It wouldn't surprise me. He's the sort you can imagine visiting toms. He's got that perverted look about him, don't you think? Like the sort of bloke you'd find in a peep show. I bet he gets them to spank his arse.'

I laughed. That's your boss you're talking about. I hate to think what you say about me.'

'Oh, it's worse. Definitely worse.'

'I bet it is as well. But I can tell you quite categorically that no-one's ever spanked my arse. Even my mum was against corporal punishment.'

There's always a first time/ she said, with a coy smile. The woman was definitely flirting. I wasn't sure whether to be worried or pleased. She took a packet of Silk Cut out of her handbag. 'Do you mind if I smoke?'

'Be my guest.'

I watched as she lit one and took a long, relaxed drag that gave me a fleeting reminder, even years later, of how good a cigarette tastes after a decent meal. 'What you've got to remember', she said, blowing the smoke out above my head, 'is that if Capper was, or is, a customer down there, then it's possible that he knows Fowler.'

'I was thinking about that earlier, but I don't really go for it. He's too keen for us to find him. He keeps going on about it.'

'Ah/ she said, taking another drag (it's amazing j| how elegant a woman smoking can look), Ijut * there's always the possibility that he might have been put in a compromising situation. If someone * down there found out he was a copper, then they might have been able to use it against him, and perhaps it's that someone who wants to find Fowler.'

'And who do you think that someone might be?'

She shrugged. 'God knows.'

I shook my head. This was one complication too i far. 'No, I think it's more likely he's just a pervert.' \,

She blew more smoke over my head. 'So do I, but JJ nothing's set in stone, is it? Maybe it'd be worth- ;| while watching what you say around him.' .1

I nodded, thinking that it was funny how when ~ you're talking to another copper, even one who's female and attractive, you always end up back on the subject of work. For once, I just wanted to forget about it. I wanted to talk more about her. j What she was interested in. What made her tick. What she looked for in a man. And whether she really was flirting.

But the opportunity had passed, and a couple of f minutes later she stubbed her cigarette out and said f that she ought to be getting back. We split the bill fifty-fifty and headed outside. Night was falling and the lowlifes who inhabit King's Cross after dark were coming out of the cracks in the pavement ^ and looking round for customers and victims. I suggested we share a cab back but she told me she was perfectly capable of getting herself back on the Tube. 'I am a police officer, you know, John/ she said dismissively.

'Don't say that too loudly round here.'

'And don't keep going on.' Her face broke into a smile. 'Look, I had a good time tonight. We'll have to do it again sometime.'

I nodded. 'Definitely.'

We had an awkward moment when we thought about shaking hands, but didn't quite go through with it, and then she said goodbye and headed off towards the Underground, while I looked around for a cab that would take me back to Tufnell Park.

Part of me thought that maybe I should have tried to kiss her, or at least shown that I was interested, but the other part kept telling me that by taking a little pain now I was avoiding a lot more down the line.

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'So how did you meet your ex-missus, then?' asked Elaine.

It was Sunday morning and we were sitting up in her bed, naked and drinking coffee. The clock on the bedside table said half eleven and her right hand was on my thigh, which made me think she probably wasn't going to kick me out just yet.

'I was a double-glazing salesman.'

Elaine laughed. 'You? Now that I would have liked to see.'

'It was just after I'd left the army. I was pretty shit at it, to be honest with you. I mean, they taught you all these ways to get the customer to sign on the dotted line, get him fired up and interested and all

I

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that, but in the end, as far as I could see, all I was m
doing was shifting windows. You know, people ,
either wanted them or they didn't. Anyway, my ex
was a secretary there and for some reason she took
a fancy to me.' _t_

'Well, you're not bad, Max.' \

"Thanks. You're too kind.' ,

'I know.'

'So we started going out, one thing led to
another, and somehow we ended up getting wed.
Christ knows how it happened. I still don't think
either of us cared that much about each other - it
was just one of those things. Anyway, it didn't last.
We went to Majorca on the honeymoon, it rained
nearly every day, she went on sex strike after I said ~
something about her mum she took offence to, and
it went downhill from there. I think we managed
about four months, no more than that. I got sacked i
from the company and she took it worse than me. I
was quite pleased, but with her it was a pride thing.
It made her look bad in front of her mates in the
office that her husband wasn't good enough to flog
double-glazing, and she really let me know it. In
the end I just thought, fuck it, we're never going to
work it out so I might as well make the break. So
one day, while she was at work, I packed up all my
stuff, which wasn't a lot, and walked out. I only
saw her once after that, and that was in the divorce
courts. She got half of everything I owned, which
was nothing. I got my freedom back. It was a fair
swap, I thought.'

'How did you get into the mercenary game?'

'My partner, Joe, he'd been doing it for a couple

of years. He was working for an outfit who were always on the look-out for people with good military backgrounds to send out to all these places. I put a call into him, he put me in touch with his boss, and three days later I was on the plane to Sierra Leone.'

Where the hell's that?'

'Somewhere you don't ever want to go. A back *.vnter shithole in Africa. And I'll tell you this, you have to see the place to believe it. I was there four months altogether, but I reckon I lost count of the number of mutilated corpses I saw within four days. We were working for the government, or what passed for the government. To be honest, it was just a bunch of young NCOs who'd overthrown the last uiuku, and most of them couldn't run a bath, let alone a country. We were meant to be helping the Sierra Leonean army secure the area around the capital city and capture the diamond mines in the interior from the rebels, the RUE'

'So who were they rebelling against, the RUF?'

That made me chuckle. 'Anyone who wanted to take the diamonds off them. That was about as radical as they got. They might have said it was all about creating freedom and democracy and all that shit but, like most politicians, all they really cared about was lining their own pockets. It's what most of those wars are about. Some people have got the diamonds and the money, some others want it. Instead of sitting round the table and carving up the proceeds, like they do over here, they get the guns out and start shooting.'

'Did you ever kill anyone?' she asked evenly,

pulling out a pack of cigarettes and offering me one.

I took one and let her light it for me. 'Would it matter if I had?' I answered, hoping that she wasn't the sort of girl to get offended by her new lover's tales of mayhem and murder.

She shrugged, and looked me in the eye. 'It was your job, wasn't it? That's what you're trained for. No, it wouldn't matter.' It seemed she wasn't, then.

I leant back on the pillow and took a drag on the cigarette as her fingers drifted across the hairs on my belly. I got the impression she was horny again. This girl had an incredible appetite.

'I shot at a lot of people/ I told her, 'and quite a few of them fell down, but I couldn't ever say for sure that it was me who killed them. There were always other people fighting alongside me. But I suppose, probability wise, I must have taken out a couple. It's not something I'm particularly proud of.' 'But you shouldn't be ashamed either. Sometimes it's just a case of you or them, isn't it?' Out of the corner of my eye, I was conscious of her watching me as she spoke.

That's right. I don't regret anything I've ever done. I shot at people who were shooting at me. I never killed anyone in cold blood, and I suppose you could argue that one way or another they all deserved it. They were no angels. None of them. Not the RUF, nor any of the others I ran into on my travels.'

'Where else did you go, then?'

'I did six months in the Congo, three months in Colombia, and a few weeks in Liberia.'

'What was it like? Was it fun?'

I shook my head. 'Not really. Most of the time we were boiling alive in the jungle, getting constantly attacked by all kinds of horrible insects and never knowing what kind of tropical disease we might pick up. The most exciting part was when we actually saw some action, but it didn't happen very often.'

'It still sounds better than what a lot of people do to earn their living.'

'It was better than selling double-glazing, I'll give you that, and I suppose it was a bit of an adventure getting the chance to finally use all my training in a real-life situation, but the reality was a lot more boring than the expectation.'

'It always is, Max. Haven't you noticed that yet?'

I suppose so, but the money wasn't that much good either. Everyone thinks mercenaries earn an arm and a leg, but it's nothing really. Especially when you think how much you've got to risk. Joe felt the same way, so we decided to set up the company.'

'What's it called?'

'It's not my name, honestly. It's his.'

She smiled. 'Go on, what is it?'

Tiger Solutions.'

Her laughter bounced off the walls of the bedroom. 'What the fuck sort of a name is that?'

'A bad one, but Joe wanted it and I couldn't think of anything better, so I didn't bother to argue.'

'Max, anything's better than Tiger Solutions. What sort of solutions does a tiger offer anyway?'

'I don't know. Fearsome ones?'

She continued laughing and I chuckled one of the

pillows at her. It bounced off her head and landed on the other side of the room. 'If you ever meet Joe, you have a go at him about it. I swear it had nothing to do with me.'

We were silent for a few moments, and even though I didn't want to have to say it, I knew there was no point putting it off. 'Look, Joe gave me some money so that I could get out of town for a while, enough to keep me going for the foreseeable future. So I can be out of your hair by tomorrow.'

She smiled at me. 'You don't have to go yet, Max. I like the company.'

'I appreciate it, but you've done enough for me already, and we can't carry on like this for ever. I've got to go out and get some fresh air fairly soon otherwise I'll go stir crazy.'

She put her hand on my arm. 'You go when you want, but not before. Not on my account. It's no problem for me, you being here. Honest.'

Well, there was no way I was going to argue. Not with the sort of accommodation I was getting. So I gave her my best smile and said that, OK, maybe I'd stay a couple of days longer. At that moment, the phone rang out in the hall and she jumped off the bed. I watched as she went out the door, her rear wagging seductively. There was a little red devil complete with trident tattooed on the right cheek. He was grinning. So was I.

When she came back a few minutes later, she told me that it had been the club on the phone. 'I've got to work tonight,' she said, getting back on the bed. She lit two more cigarettes and passed one over. You get my drift about the standard of

accommodation. Naked women even firing up your smokes for you.

'Again? Haven't they heard of workers' rights down there? You need a night off occasionally. Can't you throw a sickie?' I remembered how bored I'd been the previous night. For some reason, Elaine didn't have Sky, which had severely limited my options. The high point had been Celebrity Stars in their Eyes, if you can call some bird who used to be on EastEnders massacring my mum's favourite Patsy Kline song a high point. It wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat.

'You know as well as I do that it's a difficult time at the moment, Max. Perhaps in a couple of days.'

'What's going to happen at Arcadia? Now that Fowler's not coming back.'

'It's all pretty much up in the air at the moment, especially as everyone thinks he is coming back, except me, you, and the people who had him killed.'

'Is there any sign of the Holtzes yet?'

'No. I don't think we'll see them for a bit. Not with the police still sniffing around asking questions about the doorman who got poisoned.'

'Well, they're going to start coming out of the woodwork pretty soon. Blokes like them aren't the sort to be hands-off about a big investment like the Arcadia. So when they do, make sure you watch yourself.'

She sat up and eyed me coolly, like it was me who ought to be watching myself. 'It's nice to know you care, Max, it really is. But you don't need to worry about me. I know what I'm doing.'

Elaine was a feisty lady and definitely not someone to be messed with, but at the same time her words didn't do much to reassure me. I remember the American commander of another mercenary unit in Sierra Leone saying exactly the same thing just before he disappeared into the jungle on a one man reconnaissance near the diamond fields of Go.

The next day an RUF patrol ate him.

In the end the weather was too decent to be indoors, especially as I hadn't set foot outside Elaine's apartment for getting on for forty-eight hours. Joe was right: I probably wasn't the Old Bill's top priority. Yes, I'd slapped a couple of them, plus got one inadvertently pissed on, but people do that to them all the time. It's all part of being a copper, getting slapped in the line of duty. It's like soldiers - it's what they join up for. The action and all that shit. Granted, they were probably looking for me, but I didn't think my crime was so heinous that they'd be scrambling the helicopters and plastering up the Wanted: Dead or Alive posters just yet, so that afternoon we went out for a stroll round Clerkenwell, arm hi arm like true romantics, taking in the sun and the warmth, enjoying it the way the tourists do.

On the way back to the apartment we stopped at an Italian deli and I bought some ingredients: anchovies, black olives, fresh oregano, canned Italian tomatoes and, most important of all, a six pack of bottled Peroni. I found some spaghetti in Elaine's food cupboard and, after a bit of exercise of the bedroom variety, cooked us both a pasta dish

my ex-wife had taught me to make years back on one of the few occasions we'd been talking. Puttanesca. Whore's spaghetti, the fiery sauce unfaithful Latin wives would make for their husbands because it tasted like it had taken hours to prepare when in reality you could knock it together in twenty minutes, leaving yourself ample time for an afternoon's shagging. Perhaps she'd been trying to tell me something.

Elaine had to be at the club at nine-thirty, and before she went I told her I'd feel happier if she left the place, which I know was a bit cheeky, given the fact I hardly knew her, but to be honest with you I was beginning to think that maybe something could come of this.

'You're a talented woman,' I told her, assuming that she was. 'You know how to run a place. Why don't you look for a job somewhere else?'

She stopped in front of me and gave me a look which said: Don't push your luck, sonny. In the heels of her black court shoes, she was only an inch below me in height. 'I hear what you're saying, Max, and I will leave. But it'll be in my own time. Understand? I'm a big girl now, I can look after myself. Thanks for the concern, but save it for people who really need it.'

Which was telling me.

After she'd gone, I sat demolishing the Peroni and trying desperately to find something decent to watch on the TV, which, not for the first time, turned out to be a fruitless task. I ended up watching a programme about a family of chimpanzees living in the African jungle. It all started off quite

nicely as well. The chimps were messing about, grooming one another and generally acting all cute like they do in the zoo, and I was even musing about what a nice, laid-back life it would be being a member of the ape fraternity when all of a sudden everything went a bit mental. A friendly-looking gibbon appeared up in the trees near the chimps' camp, and one of them spotted him. Well, the next second the whole lot of them were howling and shrieking like a bunch of Millwall fans on angel dust, and before I had a chance to even work out what was going on, they were charging after him through the undergrowth, much to the excitement of the breathless narrator.

After a dramatic five-minute chase they cornered him up on one of the branches, and then, to my horror, ripped the poor little sod apart, disembowelling him with their bare hands while he stared mournfully up at them. They then began to eat him alive, as casually as you like, which to my mind was really quite disgusting. Especially as it was on TV when kids could be watching. And to think these beasts are meant to be our closest relatives.

One of the chimps was staring cockily at the camera while he munched on a hefty piece of gibbon offal, and I got a nasty sense of déjà vu because he really reminded me of that treacherous toe-rag Tony, sitting up there like he owned the place with what looked suspiciously like a smile on his face.

Maybe the bastard had been reincarnated.

I switched over at this point, having no desire to

get into a staring match with a familiar-looking monkey, and cracked open another Peroni. It made me wonder what I'd have been doing that night if I'd never agreed to take on the Fowler contract. Probably sitting alone at home watching something a lot better. Life would have been a lot easier, that was for sure, but then again it would also have been a lot more boring. And sometimes that's worse.

What I didn't know then, though, and what I do now, is that my troubles were only just beginning.

Monday, thirteen days ago

Iversson

I was woken up by a faint sobbing, almost like a kid's. My eyes snapped to attention and surveyed the room. It was dark, but the light from the street shimmered through the window, providing a murky orange glow, and I could make out a figure at the end of the bed. It was Elaine. The clock on the bedside table said 1.25.

I sat up, fumbling for the switch on the bedside lamp. 'Elaine? What's happened?' The light came on and I inhaled sharply, squinting against the brightness. Her make-up had run where she'd been crying and there were the beginnings of a bruise on her right cheek, just below the eye. The low-cut black blouse she was wearing had a tear in it that exposed the top of her bra, and it looked like an attempt had been made to rip it off which hadn't fallen too far short of success.

She looked at me, trying to maintain some sort of dignity, but the effort was too much and she began to cry again. 'Oh, Max ...'

Confused and worried, I jumped out of the bed and took her in my arms. 'Elaine, what's happened?'

For a while she didn't say anything, just sobbed quietly against my chest, and I let her get it out, not wanting to hurry her. Finally, she lifted her head and turned away. 'Leave it, Max. Please. I'll be OK.' She took her top off with her back to me - the first time she'd done that - and threw it in the corner before unclipping her bra.

'Elaine, tell me, please. You can't just come in like this and not let me know what's up. Has someone hurt you?' I went over and put my hands on her shoulders, rubbing them gently as I tried to relax her. 'Come on, tell me.'

'I can't/ she said, still keeping her back to me. 'I don't want you to do anything stupid.'

It was a bit late for that. The last four days had been one stupid thing after another. But I didn't say this, knowing that patience alone would get it out of her. 'Do you want a drink? A brandy or something?'

She nodded. That'd be nice.'

I went through to the kitchen, found a bottle of brandy, and poured her a generous slug. I poured myself a glass of water.

When I returned to the bedroom, she was sitting on the edge of the bed in her dressing gown. She'd stopped crying and appeared to have calmed down a little. 'I'm sorry about that/ she said, and thanked me as I gave her the drink.

I sat down on her dressing-table chair so that we were facing each other. There's no need to

apologize/ I said quietly, 'but I want to know what's happened. Please.'

'Why? It won't do you any good.'

'I'll be the judge of that.'

She stared at me for a long moment, and I thought then that even upset and humiliated she looked beautiful. And vulnerable. For all her tough exterior, she bled just the same as anyone else. 'Just tell me, Elaine,' I said again.

She exhaled for what seemed like a long time, then looked up at the ceiling. 'Krys Holtz came to the club tonight.' I felt something strong in the pit of my stomach, unsure whether it was fear or anger, thinking that it was probably both. 'He asked to see me in the office that Roy used to use. When I got in there he started questioning me about the accounts, about how much we were taking, where the money was going, and all that. He seemed to think I knew all about the dealing that went on there. I told him that that side of it was nothing to do with me, and gave him all the paperwork. I didn't like his attitude. He was treating me like some sort of third class citizen. I'd heard he was a real bastard but I didn't expect him to be quite so fucking out of order. He kept calling me "hired help", and then, when I couldn't tell him what he wanted to know about the dealing, he told me I was a lying bitch. He said that we'd all been cooking the books down there. Roy, me, and Warren Case, the bloke who supplied the doormen.' She was fiddling intently with a ring on her index finger as she spoke, and shaking her head. Finally, she looked me right in the eye. 'You know me, Max, I don't like being

insulted, whoever it is doing the insulting. I told him I was telling the truth and if he didn't believe me that was his fucking lookout. Then I told him I was leaving.'

What happened then?'

'He hit me. The bastard stood up and smacked me right in the face.' She touched her cheek where his fist had connected, and I felt the rage building. 'I couldn't believe it. No man's ever done that to me before, not in my whole life. Then he came over and picked me up by my hair, telling me I was going to have to learn some fucking manners. The whole thing happened so fast I didn't even have time to be scared, so I called him a cowardly cunt and tried to knee him in the balls, but he just stepped out of the way. Then he started slapping me round the face with one hand and half-strangling me with the other, and all the time he kept saying that I was going to have to learn some manners.' She stopped for a moment, and I thought she might lose her composure, but she held on, her voice quiet. 'At one point, I think the dirty bastard must have started getting turned on because he pushed me back onto the desk and I could feel him getting all hard up against me, and he was saying I was a fucking whore and pawing me all over, getting really worked up ... Christ, it was horrible. I tried to fight him, Max, I really did, but he was so fucking strong. I could hardly breathe with his hand round my neck. I thought he was going to kill me.'

I went over and put my arm around her. I felt sick to the gut. It was difficult to believe what I was hearing. I wondered how much worse things could

get. 'Did he rape you?' I asked quietly, desperate for the answer to be no.

She shook her head and removed her hands from her face, but still didn't look at me. I felt relief that lasted for all of about two seconds. 'He did other things,' she whispered, her disgusted tone leaving little doubt as to what those things might have been. 'And when he'd finished, he just looked at me like I was nothing and told me to fuck off. Like I was nothing, Max. No-one ... no-one's ever done that to me before.' She shook her head slowly like she was trying to shake the memories out of her head. She looked distant, and I thought then that I didn't want to lose her. To be honest, amid all the frustration and rage in my head, that was when I sort of knew I loved her. A bit hasty, yes, but sometimes these things really do happen.

We held each other for a long time. Five minutes, ten minutes, it was difficult to tell. It could have been longer. Eventually she sighed and took a drink from the glass of brandy.

'I need a cigarette,' she said.

'Till find you one.' I opened up the drawer of her bedside table and found a pack and a lighter. I lit two and passed one to her.

'Don't do anything, Max. For Christ's sake. I just want to forget about it, that's all. At least now I've left the club. I don't think anyone's going to expect me to work my notice after that.'

'What? You're going to ignore the fact that a piece of shit like Krys Holtz did that to you?' I tried to keep my voice calm, knowing that she could hardly be blamed for wanting to put an

incident like that behind her, but it was difficult.

'He's Stefan Holtz's son, for fuck's sake! What can we do?'

I shook my head. 'Fuck that. I keep hearing about these Holtzes and how fucking invincible they are, but let me tell you something, no-one's invincible. I might be on the run but I'm not going to leave London with my tail between my legs. And I'm not going to move one more fucking foot until I get this sorted out.'

'It won't help anything.'

'It'll help me,' I said, and got up and went to get the rest of the brandy from the kitchen. My blood was up; I needed something to get it back down d'ain. I poured myself a glass, then took the bottle back to the bedroom and poured some more for Hlaine. 'You know something, I've never met Stefan Holtz or any of his extended family, never done a fucking thing to any of them, but these people seem to be doing everything in their power to fuck up my life.'

'They fuck up a lot of people.'

'There's one way I can get back at them. And get revenge for what happened to you. I can off that arsewipe Krys.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'I'm a trained soldier, Elaine. I'm perfectly capable of doing it. And it'll make me feel one hell of a lot better.'

'Then what happens? You'll be on the run for ever.'

'I'm on the run anyway, so what's the difference? And I'll have got them back, for me and for you.'

if

Krys'll be dead, and his dad'll have to live with the J fact that he's lost a son. And if I do it right, they'll never know it was me.'

Something in her face hardened. 'He's not going to be that easy to kill, Max. Someone like him's got a lot of enemies. He's got bodyguards.'

I shrugged. The idea of killing bodyguards didn't bother me either. I knew it could be done. I could also see that Elaine was now coming round to the idea. We both sat looking at each other for a few moments, each of us wondering how far we were really going to go.

'I hate that bastard for what he's just done to me,' she said eventually, 'but I don't want to do anything that's going to make things worse for you and for us. Do you know what I mean?'

But the thing was, I'd made up my mind. 'He's going to have to die, Elaine/ I said simply.

She took a drag on her cigarette and eyed me closely through the bluish haze of smoke. Then, for the first time since returning that night, her gloom seemed to lift. There's a better way,' she said.

Gallan

Berrin remained off sick on Monday. The flu, or whatever it was, had supposedly got worse. If the truth be told, he'd picked a good day to be absent. It was another stinking hot one and tempers in CID were frayed. Knox chaired the meeting of the Shaun Matthews murder squad, during which the events of the weekend, including the death of

the possible witness McBride, were discussed, but there remained a feeling that everything had ground to a halt on the inquiry, and Knox was preoccupied by other events. A thirteen-year-old girl, just one year older than my daughter, had been dragged onto wasteground in broad daylight by a man in his thirties while walking home from the park, and violently sexually assaulted. The ordeal had lasted as long as half an hour and the attacker had also slashed her arm with a knife or a razor, even though she'd made no move to resist him. This was a particularly nasty type of crime, one that upset the public, and therefore one that upset the Brass. Which meant immediate pressure to get it solved. By nine-thirty that morning, there'd also been two missing persons reports, one of them a teenage schoolgirl, and Knox was being pushed from above to reorganize his resources. This meant cutting the size of the Matthews murder squad. With the case nine days old, and other business piling up all over the place, Knox reduced it to himself, Capper, DC Hunsdon, myself and Berrin (whenever he turned up for work again). However, due to further staff shortages within CID, I was informed that I was also going to have to work the other missing persons case, that of a fifty-three-year-old ex-con and former soldier named Eric Home, who'd been missing since the previous Thursday.

At this point, the meeting became heated, and I'd pressed, with a lot less diplomacy than I usually exhibit in front of the boss, for far more serious efforts to be made in tracking down Jean Tanner

since if she was alive she at least might be able to help. I also brought up the Neil Vamen angle, undeterred by how it had all gone the previous day, and suggested that he too might have had some involvement. 'And surely, if we've got the opportunity, we want to put someone like him behind bars?'

Knox attempted to answer my concerns as thoroughly as possible, explaining that he would speak to his counterpart on the McBride case straight away, and get what details he could, although he added that the hunt for Miss Tanner was not our responsibility since McBride had not died on our patch. We would, said Knox, continue to look at the possibility of Neil Vamen's own possible motives, but he suggested that, with the death of the one person who'd mentioned his name in connection with the case, it was going to be extremely difficult to prove any involvement on his part, if indeed there'd been any. I think I must have pulled a face because Knox shot me one of his trademark dirty looks reserved only for people who really pissed him off, but I was past caring. In my opinion, the whole thing was becoming a whitewash. If the Matthews case had been a straightforward one, like most murders, and hadn't had any connections to the complicated morass of organized crime, then Knox would have been a lot more interested. Instead, he'd clearly decided that it was more hassle than it was worth, that the chances of a conviction were too negligible to waste time on. These days it was all about performance league tables. Something like this, particularly when the corpse belonged to a lowlife like Shaun

Matthews, was always going to be put on the back burner if there were other, easier crimes coming along that could be solved. That was the long and the short of it.

The meeting broke up at ten past ten and Knox, after doling out orders to various individuals and trying to solve a couple of minor grievances, one involving Boyd and Capper and an alleged sexist comment, called me into his office. Neither of us was in the best of moods and the sweltering heat in the office did little to help matters. Knox had two desk fans blasting away but all they did was push the hot air around the confines of the room.

'Look, John, I know you're pissed off because you don't think things are moving as quickly as you'd like on this case, but you know how things are.' I didn't say anything. 'I'm going to speak to DCI Peppard, DI Burley's boss, later this morning to see what information we can get from them. If they pick up Jean Tanner, I'll make sure we get the opportunity to question her about Matthews, and see what she may or may not know. We'll also chase them to find out how McBride died and whether they've got any leads on who may have killed him.'

'DI Burley wasn't exactly helpful, sir.'

'He can be very brash, I admit.'

'He treated me like a criminal. We're meant to be on the same side.'

Knox's face reddened. He had the look of a man who's been given the job of counsellor without actually wanting it. 'It's not like that. Burley's territorial. He doesn't like people, even fellow officers, muscling in on his patch.'

'I was hardly muscling in. I was actually trying to help him.'

Im sure you were, it's just that that's not how he interprets it. He's not very good sometimes around younger officers. I think he thinks they're upstarts.' He gave a reassuring and vaguely patronizing smile as he said this - not that I thought there was anything particularly amusing about it. I continued to look at him stony-faced.

Seeing that he didn't seem to be making much of an impression on his disgruntled charge, Knox changed tack. 'Whichever way we look at it, Roy Fowler still remains for me the prime suspect. He of all people had a motive. Now, I'm not letting this inquiry go, no way. What we need to do is to look into Fowler's background much more deeply because he is most definitely the key to all this.' Warming to his theme in a way that had been conspicuously absent in the meeting earlier, he continued, occasionally banging his fist on the desk for emphasis. 'He and Matthews were definitely involved in the drug dealing. It's a lucrative business. I'm sure they fell out about it, and it's very likely that that fall-out somehow led to his death. Why else would Fowler have disappeared? Unless he's got something to hide. He's been gone, what? Three, four days now. Which I would describe as highly irregular. And didn't you and Berrin tell him not to go anywhere during the course of the inquiry?' I told him we had. 'So let's concentrate on him. I want you to review the case notes, go back and talk to his associates, particularly staff members at the Arcadia, and Capper and Hunsdon s

are going to dig deeper into what he's been up to in the past. What scams he was involved in, particularly this brothel business. This Heavenly Girls. That might give us some ideas. It's time for some lateral thinking.'

'My lateral thinking would be helped a great deal, sir, if I didn't have to worry about a missing persons case as well.'

Knox sighed. 'I know it's not ideal, but you know the problems we've got with manpower. I've got to put bodies on that indecent assault yesterday. The media are already sniffing around. She's a very pretty girl, and, worse than that, her parents are high-band council taxpayers with a lot of clout, so we're going to need a fast result. No-one wants an animal like that running loose, particularly when he's doing everything possible to make his crime as high-profile as possible, so we're going to have to show plenty of faces. I've also got the Drugs Squad breathing down my neck for help on some major surveillance they're running. Operation Swift Strike it's called, though swift it most certainly ain't, and it's likely to take people out of the loop for the next three or four days. You see what I'm saying?'

'Of course I do, sir, and I appreciate the manpower problems. We've always got them. But you're paring back the murder squad to an absolute minimum, and with Benin off sick, I think I should really be concentrating my efforts on the case.' I resisted the urge to add, 'You see what I'm saying?' I still wanted to make DI again after all, and I'd more than made my point today.

This is very much a routine one, John, and it shouldn't take you long. The bloke's ex-wife phoned in this morning, says she hasn't heard from him in days, and that he's missed two family functions which is apparently not like him at all.' He gave me the standard look of weary scepticism which greeted any family members' description of someone's actions as being 'not like him at all'. 'But the point is, he's a big bloke, an ex-con and ex soldier who works as a freelance bodyguard, so he's not likely to have come to much harm. He's probably just gone off somewhere for a few days but I want you to give it a quick once-over. Apparently, he does most of his work for a company called Tiger Solutions.'

I snorted. 'What sort of name is that?'

'A very foolish one. His ex says she's already contacted them and they haven't seen him for a week or two themselves, but I'd like you to speak to them when you've got a moment, and then give the ex a call and tell her what you've found out. If you can do it in the next couple of days it would be a big help.'

I knew there was no point in arguing. 'Sure, I'll do that.'

'Your hard work's appreciated you know, John/' he said, fixing me with one of his managerial looks. 'It all counts in your favour, I want you to know that, and I'm keen for you to make progress here. But do me a favour, eh? DI Capper told me about yesterday with Neil Vamen. Don't go talking to him about anything unless you've got solid evidence implicating him, and you've checked it through

with me.' I nodded, and he let it go. 'Now, remember, this missing persons case is very much a side issue, so concentrate on Matthews, and I'll keep you informed of my discussions with DCI Peppard. And let's try looking at it from some new angles. Lateral thinking, that's what we need.'

I got to my feet and said I'd get on to things straight away. Thinking that Knox had probably never had a lateral thought in his whole life.

When I got back to my desk, my mobile was ringing. I didn't recognize the number but picked up anyway. 'Gallan.'

'Hello, Mr Gallan,' said a pleasant, youthful 'nice I didn't know. 'It's Asif Malik here, SO7.'

'Hello, Asif. Thanks for getting back to me.'

'No problem. What is it I can do for you?'

'I'm involved in a murder inquiry which may have a link with the area you cover, and I wonder if I could pick your brains about it for a few minutes. As you'll appreciate, it's not something I can talk about over the phone. Do you think we could meet up for half an hour? I'll come to you.'

'Can you tell me who it's regarding, just so I know I'm the person you should be talking to?'

For some reason, I felt impelled to whisper into the phone. The Holtzes, and particularly Neil Vamen.'

There was a short silence at the other end. Then, 'I'm the right person. How about Wednesday?'

'Fine.'

'I'll meet you at the Soul of Naples restaurant. It's Italian.' Like it'd be anything else. 'That all right for you? It's up near me.'

I laughed. 'I'm usually limited to a sandwich on the run, so anything above that's a bonus.' If

'Well, this place is good. I'll be there at * midday.'

Thanks. I appreciate it.' *

He gave me the address and some basic . directions, then rang off.

For a few seconds, I sat there staring at the mobile, hoping that somewhere among the morass of information Malik and his colleagues had ' undoubtedly gathered on the Holtzes there'd be something that would stop this case ending up in the growing ranks of the unsolveds.

At that point, however, I was not feeling optimistic.

Iversson

'Kidnapping, Max? It'll never work, and it's too fucking dangerous.'

We were in the lounge of Elaine's apartment, just the two of us, beers in hand. Elaine had gone out to give us the privacy to talk things through.

'It will work, Joe, if we do it properly. Elaine says that--'

'Is this her idea?'

'Course it isn't. It's a product of a lot of thinking I've been doing. Now, all I want you to do is hear me out. If after I've said my piece you still don't want to know, then fair enough, all you have to do is walk out of here and forget we ever had this conversation.'

Joe took a slug from his beer. 'Go on, then/ he said suspiciously.

'Krys Holtz likes to go to a little gentleman's club called Heavenly Girls which is down round here, not far from Farringdon Road. It's a nice townhouse in a posh street, which is mainly offices, and basically it's full of top-drawer and top-price totty. Krys is meant to keep his movements unpredictable to stop any of his many enemies taking potshots at him, but word is that he tends to go to the club several nights a week, and usually most Friday nights if he hasn't pulled anywhere else. And sometimes even if he has.'

'And where's this information coming from?'

'Elaine. She knows some of the girls down there. Apparently Roy Fowler used to manage it as well as the club.' Joe pulled a face but didn't say anything. We might have one or two false starts but we should be able to survey the place all right without arousing suspicion.'

'What about you? You're a wanted man.'

'I won't have shaved for a few days, I'll be wearing glasses, and anyway the street's not particularly well lit or well used after dark, so I don't think we'll have a problem there. When Krys arrives all we do is wait for him to go in - apparently he usually travels with a couple of associates - then one of us goes to the door and gains entry.'

'How does the person gain entry in the first place? Presumably they don't let in any Tom, Dick or Harry.'

'Someone'll have to do a dummy run first to get an idea of the place. Whoever does it'll use the

name of one of the regulars, say that the bloke's recommended it to him. Then once he's been once, he shouldn't have any problem going back a second time. So when he gets in the second time--'

'If he gets in.'

'He goes upstairs to reception, which is supposedly fairly quiet, and when he's satisfied that everything's all right, he pulls a gun, takes control of the reception area, and gets the receptionist to let the rest of us in. Then, when we're up the stairs, we find out the room where Kryz is doing his thing, and grab him.'

'What about the men with him? What'll they be doing all this time?'

'They usually tend to be with their own women. They certainly don't hang about guarding Kryz. The beauty of it is that they'll be really easy pickings. Caught with their trousers down, so to speak. We tie them up, disarm them, and then we're out of there. By this time, we've hired a nice little place out in the country on a short let, and we keep him there until the ransom's sorted out.'

'And how the hell are we going to collect the ransom without getting ourselves killed in the process?'

I paused, not sure whether I still needed to convince myself of this bit. 'We get his dad to deliver it.'

'Who? Stefan?' I nodded. TVIax, we're talking about a man who's a virtual recluse. How are you going to get him out running errands?'

'Because Kryz is his son. One of his boys is in prison, and now he risks losing another one. From

what I hear, they're a close-knit family, and Krys, even though he's meant to be one mean rucking bastard, is also the apple of his mother's eye.'

'Where are you getting all this information from?'

'A lot of it's common knowledge, Joe. You know that. The Holtzes might try to be secretive but everyone knows about them. I think that if we play this right, then we're going to be able to get his old man to come. And, obviously, if we can do that, then the chances of anyone trying to fuck us over are minimal. They won't dare do anything that'll risk hurting the big boss. Then we take the money, give Krys a nice kicking so he knows what it's like to be on the wrong end of a beating for once, and we're out of there.'

'And that's it?'

That's it. If we make a straight ransom demand of half a million in cash, that'll be enough to make up for the risks we're going to have to take, and give everyone involved the opportunity to take off elsewhere until things either calm down or they don't. Either way there'll be a nice little nest egg, and it's not a sum that people like the Holtzes are going to have any trouble raising. Not with their money. The whole thing'll take a few days and then, bingo, you'll be a whole lot richer than you are today.'

'If we get away with it.'

'It's a risky venture, I know that. I'm asking for your involvement because you're my mate, and you know I've got to do something to sort out this situation. Plus, I think the money outweighs the

risks. Think about it. We spent months at a time fighting people who make the Holtzes look like pussycats, and all for five hundred quid a week tax free. This might be dangerous, but it's no more dangerous than anything else we've ever done, and this time we can all take a nice long holiday at the end of it.'

Joe took another slug of the beer. 'Have you spoken to anyone else about this?'

'Apart from Elaine, no.'

'And what does she think, this woman you've known for all of one weekend?'

'I think she'd prefer it if we just got out of London and forgot the whole thing, but now that she knows I'm committed to doing it, she's right behind me.'

'How do you know she's not going to go and blurt the whole thing out to one of her mates?'

'Because she's no fool, Joe. Plus, she owes Kryz Holtz after what he did to her last night. She won't let us down.'

Joe sat back in his seat and lit a cigarette, still not back in the habit of offering me one, so I pulled out one of my own. 'The police came to see me again this morning,' he said eventually.

'Oh yeah? How come?'

'Eric's missus. She's reported him missing. This detective came round asking questions. Had we seen him? How long's he worked with us? That sort of thing.'

'Did he mention anything about me?'

'No, it was a different bloke to the ones who

came round Saturday. I got the impression that this one didn't know anything about you. God knows

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why. You'd have thought they'd have coordinated things a bit better.'

That's the Old Bill for you. Do you think he suspects anything?'

He shook his head. 'I don't think so. He sounded like the whole thing was routine, but we really don't need the attention, not with everything else. And you've got to think, they're going to be able to put two and two together eventually, aren't they?'

That's another reason to go ahead with this. If we've got money in our pockets, big money, we're not going to have to worry about it.'

He sighed. 'I don't think they can prove much anyway, not without a body, but it's a worry. You know, it's amazing how everything can change just like that. This time last week everything was hunky dory. Now look at it.' He sat in silence for a few moments and I watched him closely, knowing that if he didn't bite I might as well forget the whole thing now. This sort of operation's going to need at least four people involved, maybe even five,' he said after a while.

'Yeah, I know. I thought we'd use Johnny Hexham as the driver. He's always available for work, and we don't have to tell him what we're doing. Not until it's too late for him to do anything about it anyway. I can even get him to nick the vehicles we'll use for the snatch. Any ideas who else? Anyone we've worked with in the past? I was thinking of ex-squaddies who are looking for a bit of extra cash.'

'Not many are going to want to get involved in

something like this. Too many things could go wrong.'

With half a million to play with, we could make it worth their while.'

What split are you suggesting?'

'Equal shares for everyone who has to carry a gun, fifty grand for the driver, and thirty to Elaine for her part in setting it up. Does that sound fair?'

Joe nodded. 'Yeah, but we've got to be very careful who else we bring in on this. We don't want to talk to anyone who then turns round and says they're not interested, because that'll compromise everything and probably land me on the same target list you're on/

'I agree, but I can't think of anyone offhand. A week ago I'd have said Tony. He was the sort of bloke who'd have gone for this.'

When are you hoping to make the snatch?'

'As soon as we've got everything organized. The place where we're going to hold him, the cars, and obviously the people. It'll be a few days yet, but that's all.'

'And who's doing the organizing?'

'I'll do all that, if you can get the other people. I think you're right, perhaps we should have four gunmen. So, are you going to come in on it?'

Joe finished his beer and sighed. 'All my instincts tell me I'm an idiot for it, and if it was anyone else I'd run a hundred miles in the other direction, but I guess I could do with the money. Yeah, count me in, and give me a couple of days to come up with other possible men. In the meantime, you get things

moving. Are you going to use the cash I gave you to cover the costs?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, that should be plenty.' I offered him another beer, thinking I could probably do with the company, but he said he had to go.

After he'd left, I poured myself one anyway and relaxed in my seat. In the end, I'd always known that Joe would be up for it because, like all people who'd worked the mercenary game, he longed for excitement and had been shot at enough times not to worry too much about the danger involved in what even I had to admit was not exactly a foolproof plan. The rewards, though, were not to be sniffed at.

All I had to do now was make sure the basics were in place, and then we'd be ready to go.

Gallan

When I arrived at the restaurant, Malik -1 assumed it was him - was already there, sat at a table at the far end. I could see why he'd picked this place: he was the only customer in it, which didn't bode too well. I don't usually get an opportunity to sample restaurant fare while I'm on duty, so I hoped Malik knew something the rest of the West End's lunchtime trade didn't.

He stood up as I approached and we introduced ourselves and shook hands. He was a young guy, thirty tops, with a friendly smile and the air of someone with a lot of self-confidence. He was dressed in a dark grey suit that looked more expensive than a copper's wage would allow, and a natty-looking red tie. A bit formal for an eighty degree day with high humidity, but he carried it well. I thought he looked more like an up-and-coming executive than a copper, but there was something genuine about him. A sense that you could trust what he had to say. If he'd been selling,

I'd have definitely been in the marketplace, and it's not often I say that.

A waiter appeared almost as soon as I'd sat down and asked if I'd like a drink. I saw that Malik was on orange juice, but since the Met were paying and I had a pack of peppermints in my pocket, I opted for a beer. I'm not a man who has any problem drinking alone.

'So, this case you're working on/ said Malik as my drink arrived. What's it all about?'

I gave him a brief rundown of the Matthews inquiry. 'It's going nowhere fast. There's still been no sign of Jean Tanner - it's like she's vanished into thin air - and the preliminary autopsy on Craig McBride showed he died of a heroin overdose, of an things. Again, no signs of a struggle. Other than that, we've got nothing. No new leads, and no joy with any of the old ones. My hunch is that someone from the Holtz organization is definitely involved, because of the way everyone either ends up dead or disappears, but I'm not in a position to do anything about it.'

Malik nodded thoughtfully. 'I'm not sure how much help I can be, John.'

I took another sip from my drink. 'I don't know either, but I'm beginning to run out of options and, you never know, you might have something that'll move us forward. Basically, I want as much information as you can give me on the Holtzes and Neil Vamen. I know a little bit, but it's very patchy.'

'Let's order first,' he said. He picked up a menu from the table and handed it to me. 'I particularly recommend the saltimbocca.'

'What the hell's that?'

'Escalopes of veal and parma ham cooked in a marsala sauce and served with veg of the day and sauteed potatoes. Bellissima!'

'It sounds like you're part-owner of the place.' I gave the menu a cursory scan but nothing else leapt out at me. 'OK, I'll go with the escalopes. In honour of my ex-wife/

'She used to like them, did she?'

I allowed myself a malicious smile. 'No, she was a strict vegetarian.'

'Clearly not an amicable separation.' He laughed.

'Are they ever?'

'Maybe more amicable than that. But who am I to judge?' He waved the waiter over and gave our order. 'Anyway,' he said when the waiter had gone, 'the Holtzes. I've been part of a team that's been investigating them for getting close to eighteen months now, and let me tell you, they are no easy target. It's like trying to penetrate concrete.'

'Why's that?'

'A couple of reasons. One is they've been around as an organization of sorts for getting close to thirty years so they're very well established. The old man Stefan's the lynchpin. He started out as a nasty little thug and amateur boxer who got into debt collecting on behalf of various scumbags before deciding he'd be better off branching out on his own. What differentiated young Stefan from a thousand other lowlifes was that he had a brain, and a very sharp one at that. He was, and is, a very good businessman. I'd say he was wasted in crime but he probably earns ten times more through that than he

would do by being legit, and he's expanded majorly over the years. Moved into gambling, counterfeiting, armed robbery for a while, though of course never getting his hands dirty himself. He organized everything but he made sure he only surrounded himself with people he could really trust. That's why in many ways it's always been a family outfit. His two brothers were heavily involved with him in the early days, and then, when they got old enough, his sons got into it as well. They probably never would have been a massive outfit, though, if it hadn't been for drugs.' I allowed myself a wry chuckle. 'Same old story.' 'Always the same old story. Everyone's made big cash out of drugs, no doubt about it, but for an outfit like the Holtzes, with an infrastructure and good underworld contacts already in place, the opportunities have been huge. And they've taken them. You know, the word is Stefan Holtz can't stand drugs. Won't let any of his family touch them, although of course they all do. But as an organization they were into them from the outset. Dope, amphetamines, coke particularly, even heroin. Over the years they've forged alliances with numerous other crime organizations both here and abroad and now they're one of the biggest importers in Britain. They also supply a lot of the gear, particularly Ecstasy and coke, to Ibiza for the summer season. So, if your nice middle-class teenage kid goes over and drops a tab or snorts a line, the chances are that some of the profits on that are heading straight back to the Holtzes, and we're not talking about small quantities here. Thousands of

people are taking millions of pounds' worth of gear every night between May and October. And that's just one part of their smuggling activities.

'But what sets them apart is their levels of sophistication and the seniority of their contacts in the criminal world. These days they get their cocaine straight out of Cali in Colombia, no middle men at all. And we believe they've set up a major smuggling route through Bosnia and into western Europe, not only for heroin from Pakistan and Afghanistan but also for illegal immigrants, particularly now the Mehmet Ulan/Raymond Keen operation's out of business. They even smuggle in ancient artefacts. There's nothing they won't touch. If it makes money, they'll be there. And the sort of money that comes their way is incredible. We don't know exactly how much it is for sure, there are so many front companies and money-laundering operations, and Holtz employs an army of accountants, but we reckon as a group they turn over in excess of forty million sterling per year.'

I whistled through my teeth. 'No wonder they're difficult to penetrate.'

'Exactly. That sort of money buys a lot of loyalty. And, as I've said, they're well enough established that the main players involved are all very well known to one another, so they're not likely to start grassing each other up, especially if there's no obvious benefit to it. A guy from SO10 did get on the periphery of the organization once but they sniffed him out, found out where he lived, and sent a couple of their people round to pay a visit to his wife and baby.'

'Christ/ I said, wondering how I'd have reacted ten years earlier if the same thing had happened to me.

'They didn't hurt them or anything, just made sure he knew that they could if they wanted to. It spooked the guy so badly he left the Force. And that was the closest anyone ever got. Having said all that, we have had some successes against them, as have other branches of the Met, and Tomas, Stefan's oldest son, is currently doing a nine stretch for possession of two kilos of cocaine and twenty-four M-16 rifles.' I raised my eyebrows quizzically. 'Yes, they also smuggle weapons as well, although that was the first evidence we ever had of it, and of course young Tommy denied knowledge of any such enterprise and claimed that, like the gear, they were a plant.' He smiled wearily, the standard copper's reaction to such boring and uninventive lies.

'What about contacts within the Force?' I asked, thinking of that arsehole Burley. 'Have they got any?'

'We've never actually uncovered anyone, but you know as well as I do there are coppers out there susceptible to corruption.' He paused for a moment as if he was waiting for me to make some mention of his old boss, but I kept silent. 'Anecdotal evidence suggests there's quite a few coppers on the Holtz payroll,' he continued, 'and it would stand to reason. But they've been good at keeping it under wraps.'

'You said there were two reasons why they were so hard to penetrate. One's the way they're organized. What's the other?'

Malik gave me a serious look. Their ruthlessness. If you cross them, your days really are numbered. Every criminal firm's prone to violence, of course. I suppose you've got to be in that line of business, especially these days with all the competition, but the Holtzes take it one step further. To them, killing's just another way of protecting their investments. If you get in their way, or do anything that might foul up the smooth operation of their moneymaking, then you die. It's as simple as that. We estimate they've been responsible for something like thirty-five killings since 1985 alone. Incredible when you think that most people have never even heard of them. But we've only ever recovered fourteen bodies which could actually be linked to members and associates of the family. Of those fourteen, not one has ever resulted in a conviction. People don't go against the Holt/es because the consequences are simply too grim, and the rewards of staying onside simply too great.'

'You make it sound like an impossible task to bring them to justice.'

We'll get them in the end,' he said, and he sounded like he truly meant it. I thought it was a pity there weren't more coppers like Malik. 'We'll pursue them to the ends of the earth if we have to, but I'll be honest with you, it won't be easy. In the eighteen months I've been with the team we've not been able to secure anything above minor convictions, and those have only been against the lower-level players, but things are changing. The government are getting very concerned about

criminal gangs supposedly running the country so they're putting a lot of resources into the fight to bring them down. We're not the only people involved. ML5 are looking into them too. So are the National Crime Squad, and even Customs & Excise are involved, which is probably the most frightening prospect of all from a criminal's point of view. So they're feeling the squeeze. But I can't ace them bursting just yet.'

The food arrived, and Malik was right, I wasn't disappointed. As I ate, I stole occasional glances at him and I had to admit to being impressed by his overall demeanour. Here was a man whose immediate boss and mentor had been uncovered as a cold-blooded killer, an event that had placed Malik under the microscope of the press and had led to unfounded whispers about his own involvement. I knew what it was like to have the media on your back from my own experience, but the Dennis Milne story had been a much bigger one than our squalid little cover-up, yet Malik didn't portray the remotest hint that it had adversely affected him. If anything, it was quite the opposite. From what I'd gathered from talking to people at the station who'd known him in his time there, he'd been a fairly quiet, unassuming guy, nothing like the confident-looking individual sat in front of me now.

'So, Neil Vamen,' I said between mouthfuls. 'I know a few things about him, none of them particularly nice, but I'd like to hear anything you've got.' I decided not to say anything about my visit to him at the Seven Bells, since it didn't exactly place me in a positive light.

He sawed off a large chunk of veal and popped it in his mouth, clearly savouring the taste. 'Sorry about that/ he said when he'd finished chewing. 'Vamen's an interesting one. He joined the family firm at a fairly low level back in the mid-seventies, apparently as an enforcer. He's thought to have committed at least one murder on Stefan Holtz's behalf, in 1978 when he was twenty-one, but he's a cunning bastard, and very shrewd, and he's moved right through the ranks. Of people outside the immediate family, he's easily the closest to Stefan, and acts as his chief adviser, especially now that Stefan's a virtual recluse. I suppose in many ways Vamen's the most dangerous of all of them because he's as intelligent as Holtz, if not more so, and he's still got the drive. The other family members don't cut the mustard in that respect. Stefan's two brothers are both dead: one, Terry, died from a heart attack ten years ago while he was in prison; the other, Kas, got killed in a car crash last year. And of the three sons, Tommy's in the nick, Robbie's not interested, and Krys is too much of a nutter.'

'I've heard about Krys.'

'A real nasty piece of work, and in a way the others aren't. Everyone connected with the Holtzes is violent, some in the extreme, but in the main it's just business. I'm not saying that that justifies it, of course it doesn't, but at least there's a reason behind it. With Krys, it's all about the enjoyment of inflicting pain. He's the sort who likes pulling the legs off spiders - you know the type. In fact, in many ways he's probably their loosest cannon, although such is the fear he inspires in people he's

never been convicted of a thing. No-one would ever testify against Krys Holtz.'

'Do you think it's feasible that Neil Vamen could be behind the murder of Shaun Matthews?'

'Be realistic, John. What have you got? The word of a dead man/

'So, the name Jean Tanner doesn't actually mean anything to you, then?'

He shook his head. 'Not off the top of my head, no.'

I refused to give up. The don't see why McBride would have been bullshitting. He said it was well known that Neil Vamen played away from home. Would that be right?'

'Well, it's certainly well known that Vamen has ..,Stresses, but, like everything else in his life, he likes to keep them as secret as possible. We put him under surveillance whenever resources allow, and we've photographed him with a number of women other than his wife, but as far as I'm aware we've only positively identified two, neither of whom goes by the name Jean Tanner. What I'll do, though, is go through what we've got back at HQ and I'll email over the information, including any photos we have of the women.'

I'm sure that whoever killed Matthews was also responsible for the murder of Craig McBride, although God knows why. To me, that level of organization suggests someone like Neil Vamen.'

'But you haven't got much of a motive.'

'Not yet, no.'

'Whatever did happen, it wouldn't have been Vamen inflicting the fatal dose, although I suppose

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admittedly, but still someone who's not going to risk his position by committing rash crimes. And ~* even if he had something to do with it, you're going to have a sod of a time proving it.' J

I nodded wearily, having already heard this several times. 'I know, I know. No-one ever said it Ŧi would be easy.' I stabbed a couple of sauteed " j potatoes. 'It would be useful if I could find *j Matthews's boss, Roy Fowler, as well. Do you ^ know anything about the ownership of this club, jfj the Arcadia? I'm hearing that the Holtzes run it, but * I've got nothing concrete.'

Malik shook his head. 'Not specifically. The number of front companies they've got is incredible; it has to be when you've constantly got ; i millions of pounds to launder. I'll ask around i within the team and see if they've heard anything, but don't hold your breath.'

'So you don't have any informants within their ' organization, then?' -, i

For the first time during the course of the conversation, Malik appeared cagey. 'I'm afraid that's classified information, John, as you'd appreciate.'

'Well, if you do, I'd take it as a favour if you | could ask the questions.' |t

Malik said he'd see what he could do. 'I'm sorry if I'm not being too much help/ he added with a V i sheepish smile. 1;

'It's a lunch's worth,' I said, 'and, anyway, I came 1

it's possible he could be behind it. Remember this, though: he doesn't do things that are going to bring attention on himself. In the end, unlike Kryz, he's first and foremost a businessman. A nasty one, *?

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here more in hope than expectation. But if you can get me that info on Vamen's associates and women, I'd appreciate it. It might even be worth buying you coffee for.'

Malik smiled. 'Now that's an offer I'll take you

up on.'

I ordered two coffees - a cappuccino for me, a black filter for him - and the conversation drifted on to other things, mainly what life was like back at the station. I told him I didn't think he was missing much: Capper was still a talentless arsehole, Knox was still yearning for a detective superintendent role, the chief super was still an idiot. We had a few laughs about things, and found we got on pretty well, but soon Malik was looking at his watch and saying it was time to go.

We stood up at the same time, me a good four inches taller, and shook hands.

'Good luck with the case, John,' he told me, 'but be careful as well. The Holtzes, and Neil Vamen in particular, are not people to mess about with. If it came to it, they're not afraid to put a bullet in a copper.'

Which is just the sort of uplifting advice you need on a Wednesday afternoon.

Wednesday was Berrin's first day back at work after his impromptu bout of summer flu, which was the reason I hadn't allowed him to come on the lunch with Malik, but had instead got him reviewing witness statements. He wasn't going to get a decent meal on the Met when he'd spent the last three days lolling about at home. The bastard

looked quite brown, too, which made me suspicious. When I got back to the station that afternoon he was doing an interview with a man who'd been arrested for possession of eight hundred quid's worth of counterfeit currency. Apparently there'd been no other CID available, and such was the quality of the fakes it was thought appropriate that there was plainclothes representation when they were talking to him.

While I waited for him to come out of his interview, I wrote down what I'd picked up in the meeting with Malik. I also checked my emails but he'd yet to send through the information he'd promised me, which wasn't a huge surprise. He was a busy guy and it could wait, particularly since it didn't sound like there was going to be anything earth-shattering contained in it. The Shaun Matthews incident room was eerily quiet again that afternoon, with me the solitary person in it. For some reason, it made me feel sorry for Matthews in a way I doubted he'd ever deserved, but there was something vaguely undignified about the way his death was steadily being forgotten by those charged with finding his killer. As if he simply wasn't important enough.

I picked up the phone and dialled the elusive DI Burley, expecting to get his voicemail as I had on the last two occasions I'd called. He hadn't returned either of those calls. This time, however, I was in luck.

'Burley/ he grunted. Even his telephone manner was obnoxious.

'Hello, sir/ I said, trying hard to sound as polite as possible. 'It's DS Gallan here.'

'You again. What the fuck are you hassling me for now?'

'I wondered if there was any sign of Jean Tanner yet.'

'Listen, I told you the other day, and I've told your DCI since then, that when she turns up we'll let you know.'

'Is there any actual effort being made to find her?' I asked.

What do you want me to do, run adverts on the front page of The Times? Do a door-to-door poster campaign? We're looking all right, but we haven't got unlimited money and manpower, so it's going to take some time.'

'And what sort of progress are you making?'

'A lot more if I didn't keep getting my voicemail clogged up by the likes of you.'

'If you'd let us fucking help in the first place--'

'Don't ever swear at me, Gallan/ he growled, but by this time I was past caring.

'Is someone paying you to drag your feet on this? Is that why you're taking so fucking long about it?'

'You piece of shit. You'll be hearing from me about what you just said.'

I think we both hung up on each other at pretty much the same time, and I was left staring at the phone, wondering what motivated some people to join the police force. In Burley's case, it was probably a desire to mess up people's lives. I hoped he didn't make a formal complaint to Knox, who had no idea I was hassling Burley.

Next, I tried Roy Fowler's numbers, more out of habit than anything else. I knew he wouldn't

answer, and he didn't. I then phoned the Arcadia and asked the man who picked up whether they'd heard from him, but they hadn't. It also turned out that Elaine Toms had left, which was vaguely interesting. No-one had a forwarding number for her, and there wasn't one on the murder log, so I was reduced to scanning the phone book until I found it. She wasn't home; a man I assumed was her boyfriend or flatmate answered. I introduced myself and asked if she could call me back. The man on the other end politely asked what it was about and I gave him the usual spiel that it was simply a routine police inquiry. In truth, I wanted to find out why she'd left the club and whether or not there was anything she might want to add to her existing statements. A bit of a straw clutching exercise, perhaps, but if you don't ask, you don't get.

When Benin came back from his interview, we discussed any new developments on the case, but there was nothing of note to report. At about five o'clock, Elaine Toms phoned back. She seemed in better spirits and was certainly a lot politer than the last time we'd talked, but that didn't alter the fact that she had nothing further to add to her statement.

Fifteen minutes later I decided to call it a day, and on the way out I bumped into WDC Boyd in the corridor. I hadn't seen her for a couple of days as she'd been transferred to the assault case on the thirteen-year-old girl and was in charge of liaising with the victim. It was a role I reckoned her well suited to. She had the right combination of sensitive and strong.

We both stopped and made small talk for a minute or two. I asked her how she was getting on with the new case and she told me that, like all sexual assaults, it was a difficult one, but particularly so when the victim was so young. 'She's bearing up well, considering,' she told me, 'but it breaks your heart, John.' There was a genuine pain in her eyes as she spoke, and all I could do was tell her that hope full} the girl was young enough to shrug off the trauma of what had happened. I wasn't sure I believed it, though.

'Have you managed to get anywhere further with the poisons lead?' she asked me.

'No, I'm still not sure where else I can go with it.' T'H taken Boyd's notes on what she'd uncovered itgarding the venom that had killed Shaun Matthews after she'd left the murder squad. They were very thorough but didn't contain any hidden gems of information. Tou seem to have covered every angle,' I told her.

'I've covered the obvious ones, but I'm sure there's something I've missed and we're missing.'

'Did you ever search for any matches on the Internet?'

'I had a couple of dabbles but as soon as you put in key words, you get hundreds of pieces of information that are totally irrelevant. Sometimes I think the net's overrated as a means of finding out about stuff. And you know what it's like round here. If you start surfing, people think you're just messing about and not working. They're still Luddites in CID/

'I think I might have a go at home,' I said. 'I

bought this PC a while back and I never seem to get the time to use it.'

'Story of our lives/ she said.

I wanted to ask her what she was up to now and whether she had time for a quick drink, and I was just about to open my mouth when Knox appeared round the corner, looking troubled.

'Hello Tina, John.' He stopped and took hold of my arm. 'You'll have to excuse us, Tina, but we've had some movement on the Matthews case. John, I need to speak to you in the incident room. Urgently.'

I said a brief goodbye to Boyd then walked back towards the incident room with Knox. 'What's happened, sir?'

'That stain in the car we stopped the other day. The one you phoned in about.'

'Oh yeah?'

'It was blood. And guess who the blood belonged to?'

'I couldn't tell you, sir.'

'None other than Mr Arcadia himself, Roy Fowler. It matched the sample we took from him when he was nicked for driving under the influence.'

'Well, well, well.'

He turned and fixed me with a self-important stare. 'I think I know what's happened/ he said.

Capper, Hunsdon and Benin joined us in Knox's office in the incident room. Capper asked me how it had gone with Malik that afternoon. 'Has he heard anything from Dennis Milne lately?' he asked with a

snide smile as he grabbed a chair and sat down.

'Yeah, he got a postcard from him the other day/ I said, smiling back. 'Apparently he's opened a guesthouse in Bournemouth. Says he'll do discounts for CID and pensioners.'

Capper didn't look too amused, knowing that his attempt to score a point, however pathetic, had backfired, but he didn't say anything. Hunsdon yawned.

'All right, gents,' said Knox, bringing the meeting to order. 'Important news.' He then explained what had happened for the benefit of Capper, Berrin and Hunsdon, before sitting back, bolt upright, in his chair. There was a moment's silence while the news sank in.

'That puts the cat among the pigeons/ said C.ipper, exhaling dramatically.

'My theory's this/ said Knox, looking at us each in turn for maximum effect as he spoke. 'Fowler had Matthews killed. He used poison to make it look like an accident but obviously wasn't aware how easy it was for us to find out about it. That's why I don't think it was the work of organized criminals. They would have just shot him. Fowler's motive was drugs. We know that dealing went on at the Arcadia in fairly sizeable quantities, we know that Matthews ran it, and we're almost certain that Fowler organized it. I reckon Matthews was ripping Fowler off, Fowler found out about it, and took revenge.

'But I think Matthews had a business partner. Someone involved with the drugs with him, and that person was Max Iversson. He and Matthews were both ex-soldiers, same regiment in fact, and I

think we'll find that the two of them knew each other. Iversson found out about what Fowler had done and decided to take revenge. He may have simply assaulted Fowler, but more likely he's killed him, and is consequently lying low.'

'It certainly sounds plausible,' said Capper, nodding.

I wasn't sure. Given that there was no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Iversson and Matthews knew each other, Knox's theory relied one hell of a lot on suppositions.

'What about McBride?' I asked. 'Where does he fit into it? And what about the Holtzes?'

'I don't know is the short answer,' he said, which at least was honest. 'McBride may well be something completely different. And, as for the Holtzes, I just can't believe that they'd use an obviously traceable and extremely rare poison to get rid of a business rival.'

'Fair enough/ I said, because he had a point. I still didn't go with it particularly, but it was hard to argue with the logic. A poisoning did seem a very odd way for a gangster to operate.

'Anyway, the most important thing is we find Max Iversson and see what he's got to say for himself. His details are going to have to be distributed to other forces, along with that photo of him we've got.' He looked at Hunsdon. 'Paul, you get that sorted out, OK?' Hunsdon nodded. 'Crimewatch is going out next Wednesday and I want a photo of Iversson on it for the rogues gallery. That ought to get some response. Plus, I'm organizing a search warrant for Fowler's place.' He looked at Capper.

'Phil/ you and Paul turn it over and see what you can find. At the same time, start really digging up on Fowler's background, generate some clues. I know he's the key to it.'

Next, Knox turned to Benin and me. 'John, something's going on down at this Tiger Solutions company, or whatever they're called. It may be coincidence but that missing person, Eric Home, worked for them and he still hasn't turned up, has he?'

'Not that I'm aware of, sir, no. I spoke to his ex missus briefly yesterday and he hadn't then. She seems pretty worried.'

'I don't know how we missed the fact that he and Iversson worked for the same outfit. Anyway, you uivJ Dave go back, grill the people there, particularly Iversson's partner, and get some answers. Something very dodgy's been going on, and I want to find out what it is.'

Which were my sentiments exactly. I hoped Knox's theory was right, because if it wasn't we were left with dozens of pieces to a jigsaw that seemed to be getting more complicated with each passing day.

Introducing Krys Holtz

Krys Holtz was a man who knew that a show of weakness, any show of weakness, inevitably destroyed a man's authority. You had to be strong. You had to break the bastard in front of you and shut out every last fucking scream for mercy he made, however loud it was. After all, if a bloke didn't do Krys any wrong, then the bloke had nothing to fear. It was only cunts who took major fucking liberties who found themselves paying the price, and the price was always justified. They could yell and squeal and beg as much as they fucking wanted. They could piss their pants, even shit in them (and some of the bastards did, too), but it was never going to make a blind bit of fucking difference, because if he let the geezer go, gave him a pat on the head and told him not to be naughty again, then they'd be lining up to put one over on him, and that was never going to happen. No fucking way.

'First things first. Admit to me you took that fucking money. Because I know you fucking did so there ain't no fucking point in pretending that you didn't. Is there?'

The 'you' in this instance was Mr Warren Case, proprietor of Elite A Security and supplier of door staff to the Arcadia nightclub, who was, at that moment in time, tied to a filthy old bed in Krys's cavernous workshop. He was naked and spread eagled, his hands and feet tightly bound, and very very frightened, which was hardly surprising given the fact that he'd been part of the Holtz organization for getting close to ten years and therefore knew exactly what Krys was like.

'Please, Krys,' he whimpered, 'I didn't do nothing, honest.'

Krys laughed. So did the three other men gathered round the bed: Big Mick, Fitz and Slim Robbie. 'I tell you, boys,' said Krys, shaking his Sv.d, 'this cunt's taking me for a fucking fool. Have I got "gullible cunt" written on my fucking forehead or something?'

'No, boss,' said Fitz somewhat unnecessarily.

'Oh God, God ... Please, please ...' Case might have been a big man with a reputation to match but his words were spewing out so fast that no-one could really understand what he was saying. Not that anyone was listening. It had gone way too far for that.

'Why don't you torture him, Krys?' suggested Slim Robbie helpfully, looking down at Case's sweating, panic-stricken features.

'Good idea, Rob, I think I might just do that. It'll save us all a lot of time and will, in this case, be particularly fucking enjoyable.'

Case tried to struggle with his bonds but he was too well secured for anything more than the

smallest of movements. 'Krys, please, I swear I didn't fucking do anything. Honest. On my kids' lives ...'

Krys looked mildly put out by this. 'On your kids' lives? That's a mean fucking thing to say, Warren, especially as I know you're as guilty as sin. I can't understand why you don't just come fucking clean and admit it. I mean, we're going to get it out of you sooner or later. Why don't you save us all the trouble?'

But Case continued to protest his innocence in forced, desperate tones, which really peeved Krys. It reminded him of that time with Jon Kalinski. Right up until the bitter end, that bastard had sworn he'd never nicked a penny off Krys, when in reality he'd had him over for close to two hundred grand in cash and diamonds. And for a long time Krys had believed him, too - the smooth-talking cunt - but in the end he'd had the last laugh, making him watch while he'd gone to work on his girlfriend, telling him to be patient, because it would be his turn next. Come to think of it, Kalinski had shat himself as well. Terrible smell it had been. Runny, too. Some people have got no self-respect.

It was time, Krys decided, to drop the Mr Nice Guy act with Case and take more radical measures. He picked up a dirty apron from the chair beside him and made a great show of putting it on, ignoring Case's whines. When that was done, he walked up to his tool rack where a vast array of implements covered almost the entire length of one dank, grimy wall. He stopped, inspected what was on offer for a few moments, then selected his Bosch 3960K

battery-operated drill, a fine piece of German workmanship if ever there was one, and vastly superior to the equivalent Black & Decker. It had been a birthday present from his dear old mum and was something he only liked to use on special occasions. Removing it from its handy carry-case, he spent some time selecting a suitable drill bit, opting eventually for a nice thin three mill. After all, he didn't want any accidental fatalities. Not before he'd found out what he wanted to know. After that, he'd have to see.

He fitted the bit and turned the drill on, enjoying the rewed-up shriek it made as it shifted between the two gears. He turned it on and off several times in rapid succession, and once again the naked

> C'

prisoner struggled on the bed, tears of frustration and bowel-churning fear streaming down his face.

'It ain't looking good, is it, Warren? This is Teutonic toolmaking at its finest. Vorsprung durch technik, and all that. This cunt goes through concrete like it ain't even there, and with hardly an ounce of pressure. Not like its cheaper, more substandard rivals. So, think how easily it'll go through human flesh. Your flesh.' As he spoke, he approached the bed until he was standing right above it, looking down at Case's fear-engraved face.

'Please, Krys, I swear. I have never, never, never fucked you over. I've never skimmed you, I've never taken nothing that wasn't my due. Honest. Please, for my kids' sakes. Don't hurt me.'

'Admit you did it, Warren. That's all you've got to do. Just fucking admit to me that you took my

fucking money, and maybe, just maybe, I'll let you go.' He switched the drill on again.

'But Krys, I didn't, I didn't. I promise--'

Krys shoved the drill into his face, ripping a vicious hole right through the cheek. Blood splattered angrily across his features and the dirt encrusted mattress, and flecks of it splashed onto Krys's apron. He held the drill in there for a few moments while it made a nice mess, careful not to push too hard and damage the tongue, then pulled it out, taking a lump of meat with it. He switched it off, removed the lump, and chucked it back at Case. That's yours/ he said evenly.

Case coughed and choked as his mouth filled with blood. He managed to turn his head and spit most of it onto the pillow. Then he sicked up some pinkish fluid.

'Ooh, that's horrible,' said Fitz, attempting to wrinkle his flattened nose.

Krys grinned. 'Fuck that, I'm only just warming up.' He turned to Big Mick and told him to turn the radio up a few notches. 'I think we've got a screamer here.' A couple of seconds later, the sound of 'Take on Me' by veteran eighties rockers a-ha jingled catchily over the airwaves.

Case stopped vomiting and looked towards Krys with wide, pleading eyes. He opened his mouth to say something, perhaps to make a confession, but Krys would not be denied his prize. The cunt had held out, he'd had his chance and refused to take it, and now he was going to pay the price, there was no getting away from that. No fucking way.

He pounced on the bed, half-screaming,

half-laughing, and shoved the drill into his prone victim's left knee. There was a moment's stubborn resistance, as he worked to create a decent opening, but then he was into his stride and the bit was coursing through bone like the Nazis through Poland, triumphant in its efficiency. Krys was forced to look away as the debris flew off in every direction, the screams of Case so loud that they all but drowned out the vocals of one-time Norwegian heart-throb Morton Harket, but then old Morton had never had the most forceful of voices.

Finally, the bit was through and cutting into the mattress beneath. Krys pulled it out, a crackle of almost sexual excitement surging from his groin to his neck. He paused for a moment to relish the feeling, then fell upon the other kneecap like a wolf upon freshly killed prey, lost in the noise and the blood.

By the time he'd finished this one, Case had passed out and a-ha had been replaced by trendy American rockers Mercury Rev. Krys thought that he preferred the Norwegians, mainly because the song reminded him of his youth. He was sure he'd once fucked a girl to the sound of 'Take on Me'. Take her on, he fucking had. And won.

'Wake him up/ said Krys, looking down at the blood as it dripped onto the bed. Fitz put some smelling salts under Case's nose. At first they didn't seem to do too much, but then Case started coughing and dribbling, and his eyes opened. 'Oh God,' he managed to say, then shut them again. Krys wiped the drill bit with a handkerchief and noticed that some blood had got onto his jeans,

which annoyed him still more. This cunt, Case, hadn't yet paid enough. It was hardly Krys's fault if he was such a fucking nancy boy that he fainted rather than took his punishment.

He walked back round the other side of the bed, switched the drill on again, then shoved it into Case's other cheek, this time pushing hard and twisting it around a bit before retrieval. Case didn't scream at all this time, he just turned his head from side to side, alternately coughing and moaning.

'So, did you nick my money then, Warren?'
Nothing. Case didn't even open his eyes. Instead, he vomited again. Krys's face darkened. 'I said, did you nick my drugs?' Then, louder: 'Did you nick my fucking money, you fucking cheap dirty lying cunt? Well, did you? I'm fucking talking to you, you piece of shit, fucking answer me!'

And then the rage came surging up like a wave in a storm and, with his face carved into a terminally unforgiving sneer, Krys Holtz pushed the drill into Case's left eye, at just the moment when the weather girl came on to say that heavy rain was on the way.

Some time afterwards, while they were standing drinking beers and wondering whether to call a doctor for Case or patch what was left of him up themselves, Slim Robbie made an interesting point. 'What if he was telling the truth all along, and he hadn't ripped you off?'

Krys shrugged. 'Fuck it. I never liked the bald cunt anyway.'

Gallan

This is beginning to become worryingly regular/ qaid Joe Riggs with a slight smile as he led us into Tifjer'b cramped offices and took us into a back room where the window above the street was wide open and a desk fan tried in vain to disperse the intense heat. Quarter to eleven and it was already excruciatingly hot, the last hurrah of the heatwave before the expected storms came in.

Riggs went out and brought in another chair for Berrin, then sat behind the small, untidy desk facing us. Unlike the other day, he didn't ask if we wanted anything to drink. 'Before last week, I'd never had a visit from the police in my life and, as you're no doubt aware, I've got no criminal record. Now three times in five days.' He didn't sound particularly worried, just mildly curious as to why we'd come again.

The name of your company and individuals who work for it just keep coming up in our inquiries,' I told him, a smile of my own playing

round my lips. It was all very civilized.

Riggs was a powerfully built individual with very muscular, tattooed arms. He had a thick moustache and a vaguely rural Home Counties accent, and there was no mistaking the fact that he looked like a soldier. Not necessarily an officer, which I knew he'd been, because there were no obvious airs and graces, but definitely a soldier. I suppose women would have found him quite attractive in a rugged sort of way. He looked the outdoor type. He also looked a fairly upfront bloke although, as a copper, I knew that didn't necessarily mean anything.

'So, how can I help you this time?'

'It's about your partner, Mr Iversson.'

'Have you found him yet?'

'I presume that means you haven't heard from him?' put in Berrin.

'You presume right. And I've got no idea where he is either, before you ask. I haven't seen him since last Thursday. He was meant to come in on Friday and he didn't. He called in to say he was feeling under the weather and that was the last I heard from him.'

'You supply security, don't you?' I said.

'Bodyguards for celebrities and business people.'

'That's right, as I mentioned to you when we met on Monday.'

'Do you ever supply doormen?'

He shook his head. 'No.'

'Why not? I'd have thought it was quite a lucrative trade. There are plenty of bars and nightclubs out there, and plenty of trouble.'

'There are specialist companies who do that sort of thing.'

I nodded. 'I've heard.'

'Look, no offence, Mr Gallan, but I'm a busy man. Particularly now that Max has gone AWOL. So, if you could let me know what all this is about, I'd appreciate it.'

'Do you know a Shaun Matthews?' asked Berrin.

He shook his head. 'Never heard of him.'

'How about a Roy Fowler?' I asked, and I thought I caught a tiny glimmer of recognition in his eyes, though I couldn't be a hundred per cent sure.

'No, no-one of that name either.' He sat back and folded his arms. 'I think I'm entitled to know what ;1;.L is all about, don't you?'

'We found a bloodstain belonging to Mr Fowler in the back of Mr Iversson's car. That's why.'

'Really? Are you sure?' I gave him a look that said of course I'm sure, I'm not sitting here making it up as I go along. 'It's just I've never heard of this bloke, and it doesn't sound at all like Max. I mean, he's a tough guy, I won't deny that, but he's no murderer.'

'How do you know Mr Fowler's been murdered?'

He fixed me with a moderately annoyed expression, the first time in both my meetings with him that he hadn't looked like he was trying to help. 'The don't,' he said firmly. 'I'm guessing. But a substantial bloodstain in the back of a car ... It doesn't sound promising, does it?'

'But you still don't think Mr Iversson's capable

of murder?' said Berrin, looking up from his notebook.

'It's certainly not in character/ he said wearily.
'But then again, it's not in character for him to lash out at police officers either.'

'Has he been acting at all strangely recently?' I asked.

'In what way?'

'In a way that suggested that something might have been bothering him.'

'We're business partners but we don't tend to socialize much outside work these days, and we certainly don't talk like we used to. I'd say that at one time we were good friends, but ironically enough, since we've been in business, we've drifted apart. I haven't noticed him acting particularly out of the ordinary lately but I'm not sure I'd have noticed if there had been something bothering him. He's always been quite a cool customer. Someone who's good at keeping his emotions to himself.'

We talked for another ten minutes, Berrin and I trying to squeeze out of him any possible motives Iversson might have had for killing Fowler, but he couldn't, or wouldn't, provide us with any further information. According to Riggs, Iversson was as normal as normal could be, totally above board, not one to get involved in anything dodgy. Or, even worse, to talk about it.

'Have you heard anything from Eric Home?' I asked eventually.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Not a dickie bird.'

'You don't think he's connected with all this, then?' asked Berrin.

'With all what?' said Riggs. 'I haven't seen Eric in two weeks, maybe even longer. Long before Max went missing. I'm sorry, but I can't help you any more than that.'

I got to my feet and Berrin followed suit. 'Well, thank you for your time, Mr Riggs. If Max Iversson does make contact with you then I'd strongly suggest you advise him to give himself up. Because we're after him, and we're going to get him. And the longer he stays out there on the run, the more we're going to assume he's responsible for Roy Fowler's disappearance, and possibly worse.'

'I will/ he said, leading us to the door. 'I don't want him getting in any more trouble than he's already in.'

When we were back out on the street and walking along the Holloway Road in the direction of Highbury Corner, Berrin said that he wasn't sure about Riggs. 'He reminded me of what Fowler was like the first time we interviewed him,' he said. 'Very keen to help, but never actually said one thing that we could use.'

'No, I know.'

'Plus, I think he was lying. He was good at it, but I reckon he was definitely giving us the runaround. Especially that bit when he let slip about the murder.'

'Do you think he knows what's happened to Fowler, then?'

He nodded, thinking about it. 'I got the impression he does. What about you?'

'What I'm thinking is that every time we talk to

someone about this case we seem to come up against a brick wall, with no-one willing or able to help and not enough evidence to break the thing apart. I think it's time we tried a new approach.'

'What kind of new approach?'

'I'm not sure,' I told him, but I was beginning to get an idea.

Iversson

I was in bed with Elaine when the phone rang. It was five past two in the afternoon and we were taking a short break from one of those sex marathons you sometimes have when you've met a girl you're really into and you've still got the sex drive to do something about it. To be honest with you, it had been like that all week. Great fun, yes, but parts of me were beginning to feel the strain. I was absolutely fucking cream crackered, and still only just past the panting stage from the last bout when Elaine picked up on the fourth ring and handed me the receiver. 'Joe,' she said.

'All right, Joe, where are you calling from?'

'A phone box in Tufnell Park, no trace possible. I've got two interested parties for our arrangement, men I think we can trust.'

'That was quick.'

'I had a good idea where I was going to look.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah. You see plenty of people owe our man big time, which is what happens when you spend your

days throwing your weight about and upsetting people.'

'So, who are they?'

'You know I told you about that jeweller, Kalinski, and his business arrangement with our man? The one who ended up at the maggots farm with his girlfriend? His brother Mike's an ex-armed robber and someone with a grudge.'

'Are you sure it's a good idea to use someone we don't know?'

'I've got it from decent sources that he's reliable. Plus, he's greedy. Plus, they chopped up his brother, and they're a close family. That's enough pluses, as far as I can see.'

'Fair enough. Who's the other one?'

'T.iiin Lewis, remember him?'

'Christ, yeah. I didn't think he was still alive.'

'Alive, well, and short of money.'

Iain Lewis, Tugger to his mates for a reason best not gone into, was a Geordie ex-marine and mercenary who'd served with me and Joe on some of our more exotic overseas tours, and who'd been wounded in Bosnia fighting against Serb forces back in the early nineties. He'd be useful on this sort of job because the potential calibre of the opposition wouldn't faze him.

'Where's he living now?'

'Down in Swansea of all places, but he'll be up here tomorrow. How are you getting on with your end of things? Have you talked to your mate Johnny yet?'

The saw him last night. He's in already. I've

dropped him five hundred in expenses and he's

going to sort out the vehicles. He's meant to be calling me back later.'

'But he doesn't know anything about the targets?'

'Not a thing.'

'Good. Have you taken a look at any possible locations for storage?'

'I drove out to Essex yesterday and visited a couple of letting agents.'

'What cover did you use?'

'I said I was a writer looking for a short let somewhere nice and isolated so I could complete my first novel in the peace and tranquillity I needed. It's a thriller apparently.'

I heard Joe sigh down the phone. 'Look, we've got a problem. The police have traced the stain on the seat of your car back to Fowler.'

This was bad news. 'So?' I said all casually, keen not to worry Elaine.

'So now they're really after you, although they still don't have a clue about what's happened. The thing is, if anyone who rents you out a place sees a picture of you anywhere, it could put the whole thing in jeopardy.'

'Don't worry, I wore specs, and I've got a bit of a beard now, so I don't know how easy it'd be to make the connection.'

'It's still too risky, Max. You're not exactly a master of disguise.'

'I thought I looked quite good.'

'I'm sure you did, but I'd better take over on that

side from now on. Did they show you any suitable properties?'

'There were two I liked the look of. One'll be empty next week, the other's empty now. Both farmhouses. I said I'd get back to them but I wanted to run the details past you first. See if there was one you preferred.'

'All right, I'll come over and get the stuff off you, and then I'd better do the booking. I'll need some of that money back.'

'No problem. Come over now.' Elaine pulled a face. It looked like she wasn't finished with me yet. Much more of this and I was going to have to find some bromide to stick in her tea.

'I'll be there in an hour/ he said.

'One last thing,' I said, 'before you go. The tools we're going to need for the job . . .'

I've got enough. Don't worry about that.'

'Till see you in an hour, then.'

I rang off and forced myself to smile at Elaine. I was trying to take in the news that I was now a suspect for a murder. One more reason, I reckoned, to make sure everything went to plan with the Holtz snatch.

She sat up in the bed and lit a cigarette. 'So, things moving along then, are they?' she asked.

'Everything's going peachy,' I said, but there must have been something in my tone.

'But?'

What is it about women? They can always see through your lies. I gave her a quick rundown of our conversation, mentioning about the police being on to me.

'What are you going to do about it?'

I shrugged. 'Not a lot I can do, really. It's a pain

having them on my back, but if I keep my wits about me, then that's all it'll be. Not enough to mess up any of the plans.'

'It's suspicion of murder, Max, not unpaid parking tickets, so they're going to be making an effort to find you.'

I nodded. She was right. 'I'll be careful, don't worry.'

She took a drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke up towards the ceiling. 'What are you going to do when this is all over?'

'I'm going to get out of the country for a while. I know a bloke who puts together perfect-quality fake passports, and I'll have money as well, so I'll be able to survive. Anyway, everything'll die down in a few months. I mean, they haven't got any other evidence against me on the Fowler thing, and they're never going to find the body, not if the Holtzes have done their bit, so it'll end up gathering dust in the unsolveds. I'll just come back in a while and tell them it was nothing to do with me.'

'What about me, though?' she asked.

I thought about that one for a moment. 'Do you want to come with me? We'll both have cash, and there's nothing keeping you here any more.' I might have only known Elaine for a few days but sometimes you can just tell when they're right for you. My mum and dad had got engaged after only two weeks, so whirlwind romances obviously ran in the family. They'd lasted close to five years, too. Not that I fancied getting hitched just yet.

'Do you want me to?' she asked, her expression serious. I knew then that she felt the same way.

Sometimes, with her, it had been difficult to tell. She could be a bit distant on occasion, to be honest with you, and it had made me wonder more than once whether I was maybe outstaying my welcome.

I nodded. 'Yeah. I do/

'Have you got anywhere in mind?'

'As long as it's not Sierra Leone, I don't much care.'

She smiled. 'How about Bermuda? I've always fancied going there.'

I shrugged, thinking that whoever said money didn't buy happiness was badly fucking mistaken. 'Sure, Bermuda it is.'

'Let's have a little celebration, then. Fancy a beer?'

Life doesn't get much better than that, does it? A beautiful naked woman with a devil tattooed on her shapely rear offering to go and get you a nice, cool lager while you lounge idly on her bed.

'Yeah, I'd love one,' I said, getting myself comfortable and lighting a cigarette of my own.

I watched as she breezed out of the bedroom, thinking that this time in a week I'd either be the happiest man on earth, or dead. And if I was dead, none of it was going to matter anyway. High stakes, yes, but then that's what it's all about, isn't it? That's what made it all the more exciting. I remembered a phrase someone had quoted to me when I was out in Africa. It was something a French general had said to his men back in the nineteenth century when they were defending a town from the British. The enemy have vastly superior numbers. They are coming at us from three sides. Soon their

encirclement will be complete. Our right flank is collapsing, casualties are high, our forces are in retreat. Situation perfect. Attack.' And that's the thing. Half the joy is facing superior odds and winning. I might have thought I wanted the quiet life, but in the end, like all true soldiers, I longed for that old call to arms. Even better when there was a pot of gold at the end of it that would set me up for ever.

When Elaine returned with the beers, I had a grin on my face the size of China.

Gallan

I was in court all Friday afternoon giving evidence in the case of a child molester. He'd been accused of ,v_ i ing young boys at the swimming club he helped run for inner-city kids with limited access to leisure facilities. It was something I'd worked on months before but, as everyone knows, the wheels of justice turn incredibly slowly. The defence barrister gave me as hard a time as possible in the stand, taking full advantage of the fact that forensic evidence was limited and that most of the case against his client rested solely on the words of children, several with learning difficulties, who could easily be lying. But I'm no pushover and I held my ground firmly and with barely concealed contempt for the man in front of me. The defendant already had three previous convictions for exactly this type of offence - not that the jury were aware of that - so, as far as I could see, the defence barrister had to be pretty damned sure the man he was defending was guilty. In which case, he was

helping to put a dangerous man back on the street so that he could continue to prey on the kind of people least able to stop him. You can couch it how you want it, spout all this bullshit about everyone being entitled to a proper defence, but it was still wrong. As far as I was concerned, to put the rights of someone who abused children for his own enjoyment above those of the same children to live their lives free from these kinds of assaults was probably the single most perverted aspect of the British justice system, and one of the few things that made me doubt my own role in upholding the law. That well-educated, supposedly respectable men and women were paid sums of money vastly out of proportion to their talent to help keep this situation going, and from the public purse as well, only served to spawn that doubt.

The best way to combat this, however, is to beat them at their own game, and in that particular battle I knew I'd done just that, constantly staring my enemy down and using just the right levels of sarcasm in my answers to make him look foolish in front of the jury. It was a small victory - after all, the lawyer still went home with a nice fat sum of money for his efforts, if you can call them that - but it was a victory nonetheless, and I felt confident that a conviction was on the cards which, ultimately, was the most important thing.

So I was in good cheer when I escaped at just after five (the wheels of justice are not only incredibly slow but also work, with rare exceptions, to office hours) and took the DLR south of the river to pick up my daughter for the weekend. I hadn't

seen her in close to a month, so I was looking forward to it, and so it seemed was she, still being of the age where she can appreciate her dad's company. We travelled back by Tube and I took her to the Pizza Express on Upper Street for an evening meal during which I caught up with everything in her life: school, fashion, friends, boyfriends, all that hair-raising stuff that makes you think kids grow up far too fast these days, while at the same time being careful to avoid the topic of her mother and the boyfriend. She mentioned him once, telling me about some clothes he'd bought her, but I changed the subject. I really didn't want to hear about him. In the early days after I'd left, Rachel v.'oriW ask me when I was going back home, and wuuiU say how much she missed me. She'd tell me how much she disliked Carrier and how he could never take my place, and it used to break my heart because I could do nothing about it. Over time, though, she'd complained about him less and less, and, although she always said she missed me, and would always give me an enthusiastic hug whenever we met, she talked less and less about me going back there, as if she'd finally got round to accepting the situation, and Carrier had finally got round to convincing her that he wasn't such a bad bloke after all. Even though the bastard was.

During our meal that evening she talked just like a happy, well-adjusted kid leading a happy, well adjusted life. It seemed I'd become somewhat surplus to requirements.

We didn't get back to my flat until quarter past nine, and it was gone ten by the time I finally shut

the door to the bedroom and left her sleeping. I'd forgotten how tiring kids can be.

I wanted to sit down and veg out in front of the TV but things were still bugging me on the case, and I'd promised myself I'd try a new angle, so I cracked open a beer and booted up my rarely used PC. It was time to see what the Internet had to offer as an investigative tool.

First of all I went through the ritual of checking my emails, which didn't usually take very long as I rarely received any, and immediately saw that there was one from Malik entitled 'Information as requested' which came with a load of attachments. It appeared to have been sent that morning and had been copied to my PC at work.

The first set of attachments comprised photographs, mostly surveillance ones, and short biographies of known or suspected associates of Neil Vamen. There were nine of them in all and they included Jackie Slap Merriweather and several others I recognized. The biographies contained the criminal records of the nine, which encompassed a whole variety of offences with a particular emphasis on ones of violence, and a summary of each of their relationships with Vamen. I blew each photo up to full size and printed them off one by one so they could be shown to the neighbours of Shaun Matthews and Jean Tanner, in the hope that they might be familiar.

The second set of attachments contained details and photographs of three women suspected of being Vamen's mistresses. One of them, as suggested by McBride and missed initially by Malik, was Jean

Tanner. According to the records, Vamen had been seen visiting her home in Finchley on a number of occasions. He'd also taken her for a long weekend to his luxury apartment in Tenerife back in March with one of his other mistresses in tow. The report confirmed that she was a prostitute with two previous convictions, but said nothing else of note. Out of curiosity, I looked at the files on the other two mistresses and was vaguely interested to see that both women were very different. The one who'd accompanied Jean and Vamen to Tenerife was a glossy-looking nineteen-year-old former dental nurse, now full-time plaything, while the other was an attractive forty-six-year-old psychotherapist who'd fallen for his charms while she'd been reviewing his progress during his only stint in prison (drugs and weapons offences). They'd apparently been enjoying an on-off relationship for the past twelve years, ever since he'd been released, and I wondered idly if she was pleased with the way he'd come on.

But nothing really stood out, so I sent a quick message back to Malik, thanking him for his help, and moved on to the net proper. I started by finding a search engine and typed in the words 'snake poison', which I thought ought to give me some hits. It did, far too many, most of which were totally irrelevant. I tried different search engines, then narrowed the hunt down, putting in 'venom', 'snake venom', 'elapid venom' and, finally, 'viper venom'. I reeled through the dozens of hits I picked up, switched search engines constantly, and went back over Boyd's notes on the subject, all the time racking my brains

for ideas that could actually move me forward.

I'd been at it well over an hour, and was already beginning to agree with Boyd's assertion that the Internet was a hopelessly overhyped means of uncovering information, when something caught my eye. The intro line read: 'Snake Venom part of Mujahidin Arsenal' and referred the reader to what looked like an eastern European media website. I yawned and double-clicked. Outside, I could hear the rain tumbling down, and the ominous rumble of thunder.

The article from which the intro line came had been written in October 1995 and concerned the so called mujahidin, foreign Islamic fundamentalists who were fighting alongside fellow Muslims in Bosnia Herzegovina. It seemed they had become an integral part of the conflict, being both well organized and well financed, with extensive backing from a number of Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. According to the article, they were also using some interesting weapons in their fight, one of which was snake venom. Vials of venom from the Egyptian viper, or asp, had been used by their spies within the enemy camps to poison senior enemy officers. In one cited instance three Bosnian Croat officers, including a colonel, had had the venom slipped into their food by a female Muslim cook posing as a Croat (an easy thing to do since they were essentially the same ethnic group) and all had died before the plot had been uncovered. The article didn't say what had happened to the cook but stated that the poisons definitely existed and had originated with the mujahidin and, in particular,

an Arab officer with the nom de guerre Tajab.

At last I had something. It wasn't much, but it was a start. Malik had mentioned Bosnia as a supply route used by the Holtzes to bring both drugs and illegal immigrants into western Europe and, ultimately, Britain, although the connection was a tenuous one. There was a list of related articles on the left-hand side of the screen and I scrolled through them, skim-reading about the role the fundamentalists had played in what was described, quite accurately it seemed, as the bloodiest European conflict since 1945. Ruthless in battle, they were a formidable fighting force, their infamy far outweighing their actual numbers. So much so that, according to one of the articles .v^U^ii in January 1996, the United Nations demanded their removal as part of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement between the warring parties. The next article, written later that month, continued in the same vein, this time citing a claim made by the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic that mujahidin had attacked Serb positions northwest of Zenica, and that, in separate ceasefire violations, Iranian military advisers and British mercenaries were continuing to train Muslim forces in bases east and south of Sarajevo.

The British connection again. Still tenuous, but there all the same. I made some notes, then left the website and typed in 'mercenaries in Bosnia' in the search-engine box. Plenty of hits came up, as expected, and once again I began the long trawl.

As I looked, I began to wonder whether this man Karadzic was making things up. After all, all wars

contain plenty of lies and propaganda. But then I found an article in the New York Times, dated October 1995, which covered the story of foreign involvement in the war, stretching back to its beginnings in early 1992, and contained information about who'd been involved. There'd been the usual suspects: the mujahidin; the occasional middle class Western boys who'd been so sickened by the atrocities being visited on the Muslims that they'd gone out to try to help; the adventure seekers and nutters who for some reason are always attracted to the world's troublespots; and there'd been a company called Contracts International, based in London, who'd been supplying former British soldiers to help train Muslim forces in a variety of military techniques, including guerrilla warfare. The spokesman for Contracts International was Martin Leppel, a former captain in the Parachute Regiment. In the article, he admitted that some of the firm's employees were in Bosnia but declined to comment any further. The writers stated that no fewer than twenty-one of the company's operatives were there, and that it was almost certain they were being bankrolled by senior members of the Saudi Arabian royal family.

I noted the name of the company and its representative, then checked to see if they had a website.

Not surprisingly they didn't, so I did a search on Contracts International and discovered a number of newspaper articles about the company. Founded in 1991 by Leppel, and with a full-time staff estimated at two hundred, they'd been involved in conflicts all over the world, but I concentrated solely on Bosnia.

From what I could gather, there was nothing untoward about their activities in the region. You could even say, depending on your point of view I suppose, that they were actually providing a service, since the Muslims were so hopelessly outgunned. But the other warring parries had demanded they leave after the Dayton Accord because their presence was seen as provocative, although there was evidence that some had stayed behind to continue their work in breach of the treaty.

It was getting close to midnight when I opened an article from Der Spiegel, dated September 1997, in which the words Contracts International appeared. I was too tired to take in the fact that it V;?c written in German, but something immediaitiy caught my eye. It was a black and white photograph of two men walking towards a camera along what looked like a mountain road. One of the men, the younger of the two, was dressed in military fatigues, the other in a dark suit. They appeared to be talking to each other, and neither was looking at the camera. In fact, it looked as if they were unaware their picture was being taken.

The one on the left, the soldier, looked familiar, but I couldn't work out from where. It wasn't a particularly good shot of him, but I knew I wasn't mistaken. I'd definitely seen the man before.

As for the one in the suit, he was even more familiar. But then he would have been. Not only had Malik supplied me with his photograph: I'd run into him only days earlier.

It was Neil Vamen's man, Jackie Slap Merriweather.

Iversson

The rain came down like a tropical monsoon. A month with none and then the whole lot arrives at once, just like London buses. It was difficult to see out of the car window, there was so much of it, but I suppose in a way that was useful. At least no-one would be paying me too much attention as I sat parked across the road from the flash-looking four-storey townhouse where the Heavenly Girls brothel was based.

For the hundredth time that night, I looked at my watch. 1.15 a.m. I'd been there close to two hours now, watching and waiting, seeing how much activity there was, wondering if that pervert Krys Holtz was going to turn up. A steady flow of cabs had been pulling up and spitting out their male passengers, mainly of the suited and booted variety, all looking like they had the cash to pay the sort of prices this place apparently asked. Elaine had told me she'd heard that thirty or so women worked for them but only about ten were there at

any one time, in keeping with the intimate atmosphere. I reckoned that those ten were being kept pretty fucking busy if tonight was typical, and there'd probably be as many as twenty-five bodies in there when we hit the place. This meant we were going to have to move extremely fast. With that many people and that many rooms, it would be impossible to secure everyone, so you had to guess that one of them was going to be able to get a call in to the police. The Met were never the speediest bastards in the world, but if the person on the other end of the blower sounded desperate enough, they'd probably pull their finger out. That would mean a five- or six-minute initial response time, which didn't give us a lot of leeway.

uuu. things were coming together, and that was the main thing. Johnny Hexham, a man always in pursuit of money, had already stolen the first car, the one I was in now, and was currently hunting down a van to use as transport for Holtz. Joe, acting as a businessman in pursuit of some much-needed recuperation, had made a verbal agreement to hire one of the farmhouses I'd seen on a one-month let, starting the following day, and was scheduled to go down there in a few hours' time to put down the money and pick up the keys. Johnny was on driving standby every night the following week, and the rest of the team were together, although I still hadn't met the jeweller's brother, Kalinski. If all went according to plan, I'd get to give him the onceover the following night when the four of us, minus Johnny, met to discuss the final details.

A black Toyota Land Cruiser pulled up outside

Heavenly Girls and stopped, engine rumbling, by the side of the road. A couple of seconds later a big bloke, at least six four, probably more, stepped out. This was Fitz, if Elaine's description was correct.

Another bloke, only slightly shorter and with the same build, came out the other side. Big Mick. And then the man himself, Krys Holtz, emerged from the front passenger side and stepped onto the pavement.

Krys was a lot shorter than the other two, probably no more than five ten, but again he had the big build. He was no fucking oil painting either, and you could understand why he had to pay for it a fair amount. He dressed well, in an expensive dark suit and leather coat, but his face was all fat and jowly, like someone had lived in it too long, and his haircut - a big black Elvis-style quiff that had gone out of fashion when the King was still below fifteen stone - was all over the shop. He was only meant to be thirty but he looked at least ten years older. I was surprised that the sight of him didn't fill me with rage. Instead, I watched him calmly, knowing that I'd be getting even shortly.

Krys hurried up the steps to the house, flanked by the other two, then the door opened and a very satisfied-looking Tugger Lewis stepped out. Tugger moved aside, avoiding the group, who walked through the space he'd just occupied as if he wasn't there. He made his way over to the car and, after turning round to check that Krys and his men had entered the building, got in the passenger side. I started the engine and pulled away from the kerb. It was 1.25 a.m.

'So, how did it go?'

'Very nice/ said Tugger in his thick Geordie accent. 'The lasses are high quality, I have to say.' They ought to be for that sort of price.'

'Aye, I know. Two hundred quid for half an hour. That's about two quid a thrust. It's a shocking price. I was down at a place in Puerto Banus a couple of years back and it cost 38 pounds 70 pence for a girl once the exchange rate was taken into account. And you got forty minutes.'

'See, that's what I'd consider a fair deal. A quid a minute. Not much more expensive than a fairground waltzer.'

'And considerably more exciting.'

'Exactly. So, what's the layout in there like?'

'Reception's on the second floor. There's a lift guo up there. You come straight out into a foyer and you're facing the lass on the desk.'

'Security?'

'Two bouncers in dickie bows. Big lads, mind, but not armed. As far as I saw, it's only them, and they won't be any trouble. There's a bar that's off the foyer and that's where the lasses hang out when they're not otherwise engaged. You can go in there and have a drink with them; if you like one, you go off with her to one of the rooms. I'm not sure how many rooms there are, definitely no more than a dozen. I went up to the next floor and there were six that I counted, all very spacious and comfortable. They use rooms on the fourth floor as well, and I reckon it'll be the same layout. The second floor's just the reception area, and the first and ground floor's accommodation for the staff, I think. Basically, the whole building belongs to them.'

'Well, you know the plan, Tugger. Will it work in that sort of place?'

He appeared to think about it for a moment.
'Aye, I think so, but it's risky, no doubt about it.'

I grinned at him. 'But think of the rewards. Think of how far a hundred grand'll go up your way. You could probably buy a whole street in the northeast for that.'

'Aye, maybe so, but you'll have to move up there too, Max. You can't even get a garden shed round here for that sort of price. Hardly worth risking your neck for.'

'It's only a short piece of work,' I replied, stopping at a red light. It struck me then that Fowler had said pretty much the same thing on the day we'd first met.

But you know what they say. Once bitten, twice ready.

Gallan

My weekend was blissfully quiet. Rachel and I did the tourist thing, stuff we'd never done together when we'd been living in the same house, because at that time I'd never really felt the need. We went to the Tower of London, the London Aquarium, Madame Tussaud's, and even the Houses of Parliament. And when we weren't treading the pavement, we were taking it easy and enjoying each other's company. I cooked curry on the Saturday night and we ate it in front of a video of The Nutty Professor. The food was terrible, the film not a lot better, but it didn't matter. It was just a nice way to spend the evening. I let her stay up until quarter to eleven but warned her not to tell her mother. 'Otherwise she won't let you stay with me again.' She winked and gave her nose a conspirator's tap, telling me not to worry, it would be our secret. Girls can be so manipulative.

Manipulative or not, I was a lot sadder than I thought I'd be when I had to take her back on

Sunday evening. I promised I'd have her for the weekend again in two weeks' time and she told me that she'd look forward to it. I think, then, I must have done something right, but it was still a lonely journey home.

When I walked into the station on the Monday morning, however, I was feeling more refreshed than I had for a long time. Crime in the area had continued to be fairly stable in the intervening time. A fifteen-year-old Somali refugee had been put in hospital with severe head injuries after being beaten with a baseball bat during a gang fight (three minors had been arrested at the scene and bailed pending further enquiries); a spate of seven muggings had occurred on one estate, one ending in a stabbing, but the two perpetrators, both fresh out of a young offenders' institute, had already been arrested and charged; and a twenty-one-year old woman had knifed and seriously wounded her common-law husband with a kitchen knife. She too had been arrested, and charged with GBH.

Although harrowing for the victims and their families, particularly the parents of the Somali boy who'd come to Britain seeking sanctuary and who now had to keep vigil at their son's bedside in intensive care, in many ways these crimes were a CID officer's dream because they were all pretty much self-solving. There'd be plenty of paperwork, as there always was when someone was arrested, but other than that the manpower effort would be minimal, and it would make our clear-up rate that much better. All of which meant less pressure from above.

In fact, so confident were the Brass that morning that the chief superintendent, in tandem with Knox, announced that the long-awaited 'Back on the Beat' initiative was going ahead that week. Members of CID, including the DCI, were to spend a night out patrolling with uniformed officers in an effort to regain an understanding of the pressures the uniforms had to endure, and to help, in the words of the chief super, 'to foster a continued and ever deeper spirit of co-operation between these two essential and ultimately symbiotic arms of law enforcement'. These words were uttered with a completely straight face, which told you a lot about the sort of leadership we had. I was pissed off to le? that members of the Matthews murder squad wert also being used on this exercise, and I was told later during the squad meeting by Knox that Berrin and I would be going out on Wednesday night. I made a brief complaint about this, but I knew that one way or another I was going to have to be in attendance. The chief super had sanctioned it, therefore Knox would enthusiastically go along with it, as would Capper. My problem, like that of so many other coppers, was that the chain of command above me was made up almost entirely of politicians.

In the meeting that morning, the first ten minutes were taken up with Knox's prime suspect, the elusive Mr Iversson, and his possible victim, the even more elusive Mr Fowler. Of Iversson there remained no sign, although his photo and details had now been distributed to all the relevant security services, so progress was expected in this

quarter; but more worryingly, at least for Knox's theory, was the fact that there didn't appear to be anything to link him with Matthews. Capper and Hunsdon had also been digging further into Fowler's background, and had even searched his flat, but it soon became clear, as they detailed what they'd been doing and who they'd been speaking to, that they hadn't found out anything that wasn't known already. Effectively, things hadn't moved on.

Knox then casually dropped a bombshell. Jean Tanner, he said, had turned up safe and well, and had told DI Burley that she and Craig McBride had been experimenting with heroin and that McBride had taken an accidental overdose. 'Apparently she panicked, put him in a cupboard and fled her home, going up north for a few days. She thought everything would die down, which I know was a bit stupid of her, and she got nicked when she arrived back yesterday. She's still in custody. We're still going to need to talk to her, of course, and Burley's given us permission to do that later on today.' He turned to Capper. 'I think it's best if you and Paul do it, Phil/ he said. I opened my mouth to protest but Knox put a hand up to stop me. 'I know you originally turned up the lead, John, but I think you must have rubbed Burley up the wrong way.'

"The Pope would have rubbed him up the wrong way/ I said, thinking that I would have put money on the fact that Burley was somewhere on the Holtz payroll. 'All I did was ask him a few civil questions.'

'I know, I know, but he's a touchy sort. Let's leave it at that, eh?'

VVe moved on, and now it was my turn to explain the poisons lead. I went through what I'd discovered, trying to ignore the occasional quizzical looks from Capper and Hunsdon, and even Knox, as I detailed the background to the Bosnian conflict and its connections with Britain, and ultimately with organized crime in the form of the Holtzes. Tve emailed the photograph of Merriweather and this soldier down to Malik, along with the article, and I've asked him if he can find out the identity of the soldier and get someone who can translate it. The words Contracts International appear in the article so I think it's fair to say there's some link between them and the Holtzes. I haven't been able to gf* anything on the company as yet, but I want in look into it a bit more closely.' No-one said anything for a moment; they all looked like they were thinking. Quite what was anyone's guess. 'Look, I know it's a long shot, but I spent three hours hunting down information on this sort of poison, and the only place I could find where it was used before was in Bosnia. And there's definitely a link between Bosnia and the Holtzes, and also a possible link between the Holtzes and Shaun Matthews.'

'Well, go that route for the moment, John,' said Knox, not sounding too confident that anything would come from it, 'and keep me and Phil posted on what turns up.'

'I'm not sure, guv/ said Capper. 'It looks like it could be another red herring. Maybe it'd be better if John and Dave went to see Jean Tanner, as it was their lead. We've got quite a lot of other things that need doing.'

But Knox wasn't keen on that idea. 'No, it'd be better if you and Paul did it, Phil. Much better.'

Capper nodded, but didn't look too pleased. I wondered again if he really had been a customer at Heavenly Girls, and couldn't help but think how amusing it would be if Jean Tanner had been one of the women whose services he'd used. It would make for an interesting meeting even if it didn't help us too much. I was pretty certain Jean knew a lot more than she was letting on. The thing was, nothing about her story smelled right. No-one had said anything about her being a smack addict, and there'd been absolutely nothing in McBride's demeanour or appearance when we'd questioned him to suggest that he was one either. And if he'd OD'd, why hadn't she? I could have done with questioning her, but instead I'd have to make do with getting hold of interview transcripts and pushing Knox to find out what he could from Burley.

The meeting broke up shortly afterwards and I brought Berrin further up to date with my extracurricular enquiries as we sat at our desks. He also looked vaguely sceptical and said something about it all sounding 'a bit obscure', but, in the absence of anything else, I was determined to press ahead with what I had. The important thing initially was for us to track down Martin Leppel, the man who could tell us more about Contracts International. I got Berrin to check police records and liaise with Special Branch and the NCIS to see if they had anything on him, while I phoned round journalist contacts to see if any of them could dig up an address.

It didn't take long to strike gold. Roy Shelley, a local scribe who was well known to the station's CID, had taken barely half an hour to come up with the goods. Now a leading reporter on one of the nationals, he told me that Contracts International had been disbanded in 1997 after some financial irregularities and an unwelcome TV investigation into alleged illegal arms shipments to Liberia, but tiuii Leppel was now running an outfit called Secure Consultants from an office in Moorgate. I wrote down the address and telephone number.

'Apparently it deals with much the same thing as Contracts did/ Roy told me. 'Supplying ex-soldiers abroad to provide training for the natives, and also hostage negotiators for kidnappings and the like. Ifs much smaller than Contracts was, and I think it's probably a lot more above board as well. Leppel got his fingers burnt last time. He hasn't got a record as such, but he came close to it.'

'Any information on what he's like?' I asked. 'Is he a crook?'

Shelley chuckled. 'Now if I answer that, I might be done for slander. How come you want to know anyway?'

'I might have a story for you.'

'A good one?'

'I'm not sure. But I promise if anything comes of it you'll be the first to know.'

That's what I like to hear. To answer your question, he's not a hundred per cent kosher, but from what I understand he's not an out-and-out villain either. He's like a lot of people, Mr Gallan. Tries to stay on the right side of the law because it's

easier that way, but doesn't let it stand in the way of a money-making opportunity.'

I thanked him and, after promising once again to inform him immediately if a story presented itself, rang off.

'All right, Dave, we've got him,' I said, and rang the number Shelley had given me.

It was answered on the third ring by a well spoken male voice, stating the company's name. I asked to speak to Martin Leppel. 'Speaking,' came the crisp reply.

I introduced myself and explained why I was phoning. 'I'd like to have a chat with you with regard to one of your former employees at Contracts International.'

'Contracts was wound up years ago,' he answered brusquely, clearly not wanting to waste time speaking to the police.

'I'm aware of that, sir, but you may have information that would be of use to us. It'll only take up ten minutes of your time.'

'I don't see why I should help, DS Gallan, since the police have never done anything to help me. Most of the time I'm being harassed by members of Scotland Yard who appear to have bugger all better to do than try to ruin the reputations and livelihoods of perfectly respectable businessmen.'

I remembered Neil Vamen saying much the same thing. It made me wonder sometimes whether they did in fact actually believe it. 'Any cooperation you give will be favourably viewed, sir, and, as I said, it'll only take up a very small amount of your time.'

'What type of investigation is it?'

'Murder.'

'All right. I've got a meeting in the West End this afternoon but I'm free after that. Come to my office at five o'clock and I'll see you then. I presume you know where to come?'

'We do indeed, sir. Thank you very much.'

Leppel grunted something and hung up.

The offices of Secure Consultants were on the sixth floor of a grand-looking City building on a road off London Wall. I rang the bell next to a polished brass plaque with the company name and logo on it and Berrin and I were buzzed through the door without preamble. A lift opposite took us up to the sixth floor where we were met by Martin Leppel, a short b[^]t fit-looking individual with an aquiline nose and piercing blue eyes. He was dressed in a short sleeved shirt and what looked like a regimental tie, and his thin, slightly weathered face was deeply suntanned. He nodded in greeting and we shook hands all round.

He led us through a glass door emblazoned with the company name, then through a small reception area which was unmanned (Leppel explained that his secretary had the day off) and into his spacious office that looked out on to the street. Photographs of various men in military uniforms, including a large one of Leppel in officer's garb holding a regimental sword, adorned the walls. It set off the right image of a man with a very strong army background.

Leppel took a seat behind his imposing and

spotless desk and motioned for the two of us to sit in chairs opposite. He didn't offer us a drink. 'So, what can I do for you, gentlemen?' he asked, getting straight to the point.

'We're after some information regarding Contracts International's involvement in the Bosnian conflict.'

'Can I ask why you need this information?'

'We're investigating a murder and it might be that an employee or employees of the company working in Bosnia at that time could throw some light on an area we're still a bit hazy on.'

'Which is?'

'I can't tell you that, sir. Not at this time.'

'Well, I'm afraid I wasn't in Bosnia. I've never been to any of the Yugoslav republics in my life.'

I could tell this wasn't going to be easy. 'But you managed the company, which is why we're here today. Now, as I said to you on the phone, this shouldn't take long.'

'What is it you want to know?'

'How long were Contracts International involved in Bosnia?'

'We got our first contract in October 1993 when it became obvious that the West was going to stand by and watch the Muslim population suffer. It was to train regulars of the Armija BiH.'

The who?' asked Benin.

The Bosnian Muslim army. The contract was successful and we were awarded a number of others. We remained in situ until the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995.'

'I heard suggestions that some of your operatives

on the ground remained after this time/

'You heard wrong, then/ said Leppel icily. "There were, aside from our employees, freelancers in the area providing a similar if somewhat inferior service to ours. They were the ones who stayed on after the ceasefire. As soon as Dayton came about, our contracts were terminated and we left.'

'Could you tell me who funded the work your company did in Bosnia?'

'Plenty of people have written that we were funded by all kinds of fanatics, but they're wrong. However, I'm afraid I have always treated my client list, both at Contracts and at Secure Consultants, as confidential, so I'm not going to comment on that.'

The nodded. 'Fair enough. Can you recall how many employees you had in Bosnia in total during tilt- Iwo or so years you were there?'

Leppel thought about it for a moment. It looked like he was making calculations. 'I would say something like forty altogether, though it's possible it could have been more. Bosnia was one of our biggest operations at Contracts.'

'Now I know you weren't there, Mr Leppel, but were you aware that any of your men had contacts with the so-called mujahidin, the Islamic fundamentalist fighters who were also in the region at the time?'

'Yes, I know who they were, but as far as I'm aware, no, none of them did. You must remember that these fundamentalists hated all Westerners, whom they regarded and regard as infidels. Some of them have even been linked to Osama bin Laden, so they would never have socialized with our people,

even if they were nominally on the same side. Might I ask where we're going with these questions?'

'We're trying to build up a picture, sir, that's all.' I fished in my jacket pocket for the photo of Merriweather and the soldier. When I'd got it out, I unfolded it, stood up, and showed it to Leppel. 'Do you recognize the man on the left?' I asked.

He nodded slowly without looking at me. Tes, I recognize him. His name's Tony Franks.'

The name, like the face, had an immediate ring of familiarity, but still I was unable to pinpoint from where. 'Do you recognize the man standing next to him?'

Again, he nodded. 'His name's Merriweather. I can't remember the first name.'

'Jack/ said Benin.

That's right/ he said. 'Jack.'

This photograph came from an article in Der Spiegel.'

I know.'

The article was in German, and we're waiting to have it translated. Could you tell me what it was about?'

'It was libellous. I almost sued them over it.'

'What did it say?'

'It suggested that Contracts International consultants, they called them mercenaries, were involved in drug smuggling through Bosnia and into western Europe. They never produced any hard evidence other than that photo yet it helped to ruin the reputation of an organization that employed a lot of people and, whatever anyone

likes to think, provided a service that was needed.

Ever since that article came out, I've had problems. Scotland Yard were round like a shot, asking all sorts of questions, and our client base simply dried up. That's why I'm perhaps not as co-operative as I might otherwise have been.'

'I understand that, sir, but I can assure you I'm not interested in having a go at your company or you, I'm simply interested in solving this murder.'

Leppel observed me for a few moments as if trying to gauge how genuine I was. I gave him my standard I-won't-piss-you-about look back, thinking that I might just be winning this sanctimonious bastard over. 'As I've said, they never actually named names but said that our consultants were in partnership with organized crime figures in Britain and vvt'ie using UN aid convoys to transport the contraband into western Europe. But they had no proof, nothing.'

'Do you think, Mr Leppel, in all honesty, that one or two of your employees might have had some contact with these organized crime figures?'

That photograph was taken close to two years after we ceased operations in Bosnia. Yes, it's clear from the picture that Tony Franks had at least some dealings with them, and others might have done so too, but it was entirely off their own bats. Until that article was written, I knew nothing about it.'

I nodded, trying to work out whether Leppel was telling the truth or not. He was certainly exhibiting the right level of indignation, but it was difficult to say for sure. 'And Tony Franks? Do you know where he is now?'

The last I heard he was doing some work for a

company called Tiger Solutions run by two of J Contracts' ex-employees/

Tiger Solutions. Things kept coming back to them. 'Can you give me the names of these two ex employees?' I asked, wanting to get it confirmed.

7oe Riggs was one of them; the other was Max Iversson.'

'Do you know if they had anything to do with Jack Merriweather or any of his associates?'

'No, as far as I know, they didn't.'

'Have you got a list anywhere of the employees of Contracts who served in Bosnia?'

He sighed. The thought you might ask that. I haven't, no.'

'But presumably you could dig up the information?'

He sighed again. 'It means going back over the old accounts for the company, but yes, the information can be dug up, as you put it. Though it would probably take a bit of time.'

'I would greatly appreciate it, sir, if you could provide us with a complete list. It may well be very useful to our inquiry.'

'I'll see what I can come up with.'

I stood up, and Benin followed suit. Thank you very much for that, Mr Leppel,' I said, putting out my hand, 'and for your time.'

Leppel stepped forward and gave it a brief shake. 'You're certainly a lot less difficult to deal with than the last lot who paid me a visit.'

'Glad to hear it.'

'If you do get to speak to Tony, send him my regards, will you?' he said as he led us out to the lifts.

I nodded, and said that I would. 'Did you get on well with him, then?'

'He was good company, and very professional. I like dealing with people like him.'

When we were outside, I looked at my watch. Twenty past five. The streets of the City of London were beginning to fill with the first wave of smartly dressed workers hurrying like ants in every direction, none looking as if they had a moment to spare.

'Do you think this Tony Franks character could have something to do with Matthews's death, then, Sarge?' asked Benin as we started walking towards Moorgate Tube.

He's linked to the Holtzes, albeit fairly indirectly, and he's linked, again indirectly, to the snake poison. It's not a lot to go on, but it's something. Did the name mean anything to you?'

Benin shook his head. 'No, never heard of him. Does it to you?'

'It does, but I can't think from where.'

'Something's going on at that Tiger Solutions, though, isn't it?'

The name keeps coming up, that's for sure, and it's not a name you're going to forget. We're going to have to pay another visit to Joe Riggs, but I think maybe we should leave it for a day or two. I'd like to have something to pressure him with, and at the moment we haven't got much.'

'At least now we're beginning to get somewhere, though.' For the first time in a while, he sounded enthused.

When we got to Moorgate Tube it was shut by a

security alert, and the traffic had near enough ground to a halt. I called Malik on my mobile but he wasn't answering, so I left a message, asking him to call back urgently. I'd intended to go back to the station, but by the time the two of us had walked up to Old Street it was twenty to six and hardly worth it, so we went our separate ways.

But on the Underground, heading back home, , sweating with the commuters, I couldn't get the *** name Tony Franks out of my mind. It bugged me, so much so that I got off at Highbury and Islington and returned to work, thinking that I'd never be able to relax until I'd satisfied my curiosity.

As usual, the incident room was empty, which suited me just fine. I switched on my PC, got a coffee ^ while it booted up, and logged on to our criminal =* database. I then typed in: Franks, Anthony.

One match.

I opened the file and a photograph of a good looking, youngish man with short dark hair and a calm, almost mocking expression appeared. It was the same man in the photograph with Jackie Slap. According to the computer, he'd been arrested in December 1997 on suspicion of the importation of Class A drugs, but released without charge. He had no convictions, and did not appear to have been arrested on any further charges.

I looked at the mugshot for a long time, racking my brains, trying to remember where the hell I knew him from. I'd questioned him about something. Something not that recent, but also not that long ago. It had been a serious crime but Franks had not been a suspect. He'd answered the

questions put to him helpfully and with the right level of concern. I remembered I'd found him a likeable character. He'd said he worked in security. He'd once been a bodyguard for Geri Halliwell.

And then it came to me, and I was puzzled because I wasn't sure what the information meant. I'd questioned him at his home, and the reason was that Tony Franks had lived on the very same street on which thirteen-year-old paperboy Robert Jones had last been seen alive on a cold, dark February morning all those months ago.

Iversson

'Go you can't tell me nothing about it?' said Johnny looking at me like he honestly thought I might suddenly change my mind.

'Not at the moment,' I pulled the cap low over my face, then climbed into the passenger side of the red Mercedes van that would be used to transport Krys Holtz the two miles from Heavenly Girls to the lock-up in Finchley Joe had rented the previous day where we'd be changing vehicles. Johnny got in the driver's side and took the car out onto City Road.

'I hope it's nothing that's going to get me in trouble, Max. I like a quiet life, you know.'

'As do I, Johnny, which is something you should have thought about when your recommendation almost got me blown away.'

'Give us a Scooby.'

'A what?'

'AScooby Doo, clue. Just so I've got some idea. Is it something illegal?'

'I've asked you to steal two vehicles, both of which are going to end up burnt out. What do you think?'

'I think I'm fucking nervous.'

'Don't be.'

'Where are we heading, then?'

'A pick-up in Muswell Hill.' I gave him the address and the main road it was off. 'You know how to get there?'

He nodded. 'Sure.' It was half ten and long dark. The streets were fairly quiet, it being a Monday night, and a light rain was falling. 'So, I might not be needed after tonight, then?'

'Not if all goes according to plan, but don't bet on it. It might take a while.'

We didn't speak for the rest of the journey.

Johnny continued to look nervous and uncomfortable but he drove without losing concentration and within fifteen minutes we'd pulled up outside Joe's place, a flat in a slightly worn-out-looking redbrick townhouse. I rang up to him on the mobile and a couple of minutes later Joe, Tugger Lewis and Mike Kalinski came out of the door. Tugger was dressed in a suit while Joe and Kalinski wore similar boiler suits to the ones Johnny and I were wearing, and both were carrying holdalls. Tugger came round to my door while the other two went straight to the back of the van and climbed inside. I stepped out and let him in. Johnny, Tugger. Tugger, Johnny. You two are going to be spending some time together. Johnny, do whatever Tugger says.'

'Hold on, Max. I thought--'

'I'm going in the back. Less attention that way.'

I gave Johnny the address of Heavenly Girls, shut the passenger door, and got in the back with Joe and Kalinski. Joe gave a double knock on the interior panel separating the back from the front, and Johnny pulled away from the kerb.

Ten minutes later, the van parked up and I heard Tugger gettm§ out to feed the meter. I looked at my watch. It was five to eleven.

An hour passed, and we sat there in relative silence, occasionally hearing Johnny's muffled voice jabbering on about something in the front, and the odd bored-sounding reply from Tugger. Traffic on the road seemed quiet. Joe had watched il..'- place the previous night and Krys hadn't shown. It was anyone's guess whether he'd come again this evening, but if he did we were prepared.

I watched Kalinski as he sat staring up at the van's ceiling, chainsmoking Rothmans. To be honest, I didn't much like him. He was too flash; a typical robber really. When I'd met him the previous night, he'd been dressed in an immaculately tailored suit, with gold cufflinks on his shirtsleeves and a thick gold Rolex any self respecting mugger would have killed him for. I don't like people who think they're bigshots, and Kalinski definitely rated himself as one. Joe had told me that he'd claimed to have earned more than a million quid down the years through armed robbery and the investment of the proceeds in dope deals. He might well have done, but I didn't like the

way he thought it was worth boasting about. You could tell he thought he was better than us, sort of a cut above us riffraff who had to earn their livings by actually working, though fuck knows why. A thief and a dope peddler. He was hardly royalty, was he?

Still, as Joe had pointed out, he knew how to handle a gun, which meant he was less likely to use it. The last thing we needed was a shootout in the brothel. The whole thing had to be neat and professional. That way, as always, lay the route to success. And if he didn't want to say much, then that was fine by me. Johnny more than made up for his brooding silence.

I sat back in the seat and relaxed, unaffected by the boredom of the wait. I'd learnt how to be patient a long time back. It was one of the first things you got used to in the army.

Another hour passed. Then two. Kalinski shuffled about, stretched, muttered the odd curse, and at one point told us a story about how he'd once been out with a Lady someone or other who had apparently liked nothing better than to have Kalinski dress up in a balaclava, complete with sawn-off shooter, and pound her from behind while calling her a dirty rich whore. Kalinski seemed to think this made him come across like a stud, but I thought that it would be a bit of an insult if some chick I was sleeping with asked me to put a mask over my face, although in Lady whateverhername was's case, I could see her point. Kalinski was not what you'd call a handsome sort. He had a face like a frog and pockmarked skin.

Neither I nor Joe reacted much to his story and, seeing that he hadn't impressed us with his sexual forays into the upper classes, he settled back into sullen silence, which was just the way we liked it.

In the front, I heard Johnny say that he needed a mickey bliss, like some annoying fucking kid. Tugger, once he'd deciphered what he was trying to say, told him to piss in an empty bottle of mineral water, but Johnny said fuck that, he would wait. He didn't sound too pleased.

At ten to three I heard a car pull up somewhere across the street and I tensed, stretching, hoping that this was it. But Tugger made no signal. Just another punter looking for an enjoyable end to the g von ing

At three o'clock I heard the sound of Johnny finally succumbing to nature's demand as he took a leak into the bottle, continuing for what seemed like an impressively long time.

At five past, I turned to Joe and said that we might as well call it a night. Kalinski grunted something in agreement, and Joe, who'd been half-asleep, nodded. I banged the interior wall four times. Thirty seconds later the engine was on, and Johnny was pulling away from the kerb.

I lit a cigarette and hoped we didn't have to do this for too many more nights. But that, I suppose, is what warfare is all about. Hours, sometimes days, of long waiting, then a few stunning moments of adrenalin and excitement that are gone before you know it, but live on in the memory, etched with pride, for years afterwards.

Tuesday, five days ago

Gallan

I hadn't been down that road since the investigation had wound down all those months ago. It was an attractive tree-lined street of large semidetached whitewashed villas that meandered north of the Lower Holloway Road past the greenery of Highbury Fields. An oasis of calm in the midst of the bustling city. From where I stood now, looking down the incline in the direction of Clerkenwell, I could see the imposing spire of Union Chapel on Upper Street as it towered upwards above the trees that peppered the bottom of the park in the foreground. So often London's residents and councils liked to tag the word 'Village' onto the end of their middle-class ghettos in a usually futile bid to create the illusion of community and push up the area's property prices, but the description actually seemed to fit here. You could almost be in the middle of rural Gloucestershire. Even the traffic wasn't that bad. It was a place that reeked of money.

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Perhaps that was why I felt I should have looked into the background of Tony Franks more. A man who worked in security wasn't the sort who could afford to live on a street like this. As I recalled, a lot of the neighbours had been bankers and lawyers, the sort of people with serious cash. I thought he might have said something about being part-owner of the firm he was employed by but I couldn't remember for sure, and there was nothing in the notes to confirm it. At that time, I hadn't been unduly interested in Tony Franks. He had no criminal record as such, didn't come across like he had anything to hide, and, rightly or wrongly, simply wasn't a suspect. We'd always assumed that Robert had been snatched by a predatory paedophile who'd taken advantage of the dark morning and the quieter residential area to abduct his prey from the street. Robert had been a small boy, four feet eleven, and wouldn't have been able to put up much of a resistance if his attacker was of a reasonable size, and determined.

The weather was fine and sunny that morning, very different from the bitterly cold February mornings when we'd been doing the house-to-house enquiries on this, probably the grimmest case I'd ever worked on. I stood on the spot where Robert had last been seen alive by an accountant for Citibank who was leaving for work. The time then had been five to seven and Robert had been walking past the man's driveway as he'd pulled out in his car. The man had recognized him instantly because Robert wore a distinctive woolly hat with a green fluorescent strip running round it. He'd been

doing the round for more than six months, and they often saw each other in the morning. Robert i had given him a brief wave and the accountant had waved back. He'd started crying when he'd related this story to the detectives because he had a son of his own the same age. I knew how he felt. There was nothing worse than the taking of a child's life, particularly for a parent. I remembered how grimly determined I'd been to solve the case and bring the perpetrator to justice, and how impotent I'd felt when we'd finally had to scale everything down because the leads had simply not materialized.

It was difficult to believe that a crime so heinous had taken place on what was such a quiet and peaceful street, and for me that's the worst thing about policework, the knowledge that effectively nowhere's safe. In a free country, those with evil in their hearts can roam wherever they want.

I'd wanted to come here alone. I'd told Benin that this was because it would waste less time. I'd got him hunting down any further information he could find on Contracts International, and chasing Leppel for the list of Bosnian operatives. The real reason, however, was to give me an opportunity to revisit the scene of what I considered one of my most important pieces of unfinished business, and perhaps take a bit more time to reflect on what had happened that cold, dark morning.

The newsagent for whom Robert did his round was situated on Highbury Grove, approximately half a mile north-east of where I now stood. This street, Runmayne Avenue, was about halfway along his route. He would make his way down

Runmayne, which was just under a quarter of a mile long, then come back the other way on Fairfield Avenue, the next street down, before returning along the main road back to the newsagent's. I was sure it was on this street that Robert had been snatched. Even at that time in the morning, there were cars and people about. Not that many, but enough to expect that if he'd come the whole length of it he'd have been seen by someone else. After all, he would hardly have been inconspicuous.

Franks's house was about a hundred yards further along from the spot where Robert had last been seen and wasn't one to which he delivered. Quickly he started towards it, trying to remember the correct route he would have taken and which houses he delivered to, but without much success. It was too long ago. Too much time and too many cases had come to pass since then, and already the life of Robert Jones was passing into ancient history. He would always be remembered, of course, by his parents and his sister, but even they would think about him less and less as time wore on, and to everyone else he would simply become a vague memory, a smiling, permanently young face in a photograph that would occasionally inspire a sad and wistful conversation. It was more than a tragedy, it was an injustice. Someone, some day, would have to pay.

Franks's place was the end extension of a huge villa, set back a few yards from the road, that probably housed at least half a dozen professionally spacious flats and which had two grand entrance

porticoes along its length. The extension had been built much later than the villa, probably in the sixties, and looked as if it had been attached at a slightly crooked angle. The paintwork was a fading sky blue rather than the white of the rest of the building, making it stand out for the wrong reasons. Apart from that, though, it looked OK. Small, but reasonably well kept. Newish windows had been installed on both floors, and there was a tiny, recently cobbled driveway in front of it with jg room for two cars at a squeeze. A high stone wall ^^ separated it from the main parking area in front of the rest of the villa, as if its occupants didn't want anything to do with their tattier neighbour.

Today, Franks's driveway was empty as I walked up it to the front door. Through the net curtains, I could make out a clean, well-furnished interior but ^ no obvious signs of life. I rang the doorbell but no one answered, then looked through the letterbox. There was a pile of tacky-looking brochures and various other bits of junk mail on the carpet - at least a week's worth, probably a lot more. It looked like he might have moved out.

I went round to the nearest entrance portico and saw that there were buzzers for three flats on the wall outside. Beneath the buzzers was a sticker saying that the building was protected by CCTV cameras - not that I could see any in evidence. I rang the first two but got no answer, so I tried the third. I needed to ring several times but eventually a moderately annoyed female voice came on the line. 'Yes?' she said in an accusatory voice. I identified myself, and explained that I was here as

part of an inquiry. Her voice immediately lost its initial hostility, and she buzzed me in. Hers was the ground-floor flat, and she came out of the door to greet me, clad only in a dressing gown and slippers. She was about thirty with short blonde hair, and nice-looking in a Sloaney sort of way. In a dressing gown as well. Perhaps I was going to have to watch

out.

'I'm sorry/ she said. 'I didn't realize you were the police. I thought you were here to sell me something.'

'I'm not sure if that's a compliment or not,' I told her.

She smiled. 'I don't know either. Anyway, please, come in. You'll have to forgive me, I've got a ter'rible cold. That's why I'm not working.' She sniffed loudly to prove it, then stepped aside to let me in. 'I hope it's nothing about David,' she added, leading me into a spacious, well-furnished lounge.

'David?'

'My husband.'

I took a seat and she sat down on the sofa opposite, her legs tightly pressed together. Somehow, I got the feeling I was safe from any predatory advances. 'No, it's nothing to do with him. It's about your neighbour to the left, a Tony Franks?'

'Oh yes, Tony. Nice-looking guy. Dark hair.' Her tones were clipped and upper-class. This girl had definitely not been educated at the local comprehensive. Mind you, who had round here?

I nodded. That sounds like him. This is a photo.' I removed the mugshot from my jacket pocket and briefly showed it to her.

'Oh yes, that's him.' She excused herself while i she sneezed into a tissue she'd removed from the* pocket of the dressing gown. 'Why? Has he done something wrong?'

'I don't know is the short answer. Possibly.'

'I thought it was funny.'

'What?'

'Well, the way he moved out. It was all quite sudden.'

'When was that?'

'I don't know for certain. I didn't actually see him go. All I know is about a week ago a man turned up in a van and took some stuff away.'

'This man, had you ever seen him there before?'

She shook her head. 'No, I hadn't. On the day he came I was outside putting the rubbish out for the dustmen when I saw him loading it up. I don't normally take too much notice of what the neighbours are up to - I mean, you don't in London, do you?' I nodded, thinking that that was probably the root cause of so much that was wrong with it, and waited while she continued. 'But there are quite a few burglaries around here, as you probably know, so I asked him what he was up to, and he told me he was Tony's brother.'

'Those were his exact words: "I'm Tony's brother"?''

She nodded. That's right, so I thought he must have something to do with him. He was friendly enough, too, not at all furtive, as you'd expect a burglar to be.' She paused to blow her nose, once again apologizing. 'He said that Tony was moving out, and he was helping with the removals. There

wasn't a lot I could say to that. I asked him if Tony would be coming along later and he said he would. But he never did.'

'You never saw Mr Franks again?'

'No. I haven't seen him for two or three weeks at least.'

I made some calculations. It was sixteen days since Shaun Matthews's murder. The timing sounded very convenient. Now for the big question. 'Did you take down the registration of the vehicle this gentleman was driving?' I mentally crossed my fingers.

'Yes, I did. I don't like to be a busybody and I know it's none of my business, but I memorized it while I was speaking to him, just in case, and I wrote it down on a piece of paper as soon as I got back in.' She stood up, sniffing loudly. 'Now, what have I done with it? Excuse me for a minute, will you?'

She wandered out of the room and I hoped I was going to get a break. Even if it proved difficult to locate Franks, whoever was moving his stuff had to have some information as to his whereabouts. Somehow I knew I was on the right track. Call it instinct, if you like. It was just a matter of continuing to pursue the scent while at the same time persuading my superiors that it was a worthwhile investment of my time. This would be the hardest part, particularly now that it looked like the area's criminals were beginning to wake up from the previous week's inactivity. An aggravated burglary the previous night in which a pregnant woman had been threatened with a knife by two intruders,

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who'd threatened to cut her open if she didn't reveal the whereabouts of her valuables, had already caused the chief super yet another serious resources headache. What with the continued clamour over the assault on the young girl, things were getting extremely stretched. Already Knox had hinted that the murder squad was likely to be reduced still further in the next twenty-four hours, so time was of the essence.

'Here it is/ she said, coming back in the room with a piece of paper. 'I wasn't sure whether I'd thrown it away or not, but it was in the drawer.' She handed it to me, and I put it in my top pocket, thanking her.

'Can you describe the man for me, Miss ... ?'

'Deerborne. Mrs Judy Deerborne. I'm not too good at this, but I'll give it a go. He was quite well built. Sort of tough-looking, which was why I wasn't entirely sure about him. About fortyish, maybe a couple of years older, five nine or ten, and I think he was bald, although it wasn't easy to tell, because he was wearing a cap. He also had quite a big head.'

'I disagree with you,' I said, 'I think you are good at it.' I was glad I'd worn the suit I'd been wearing yesterday because it still contained the photograph I'd shown to Martin Leppel. I fished it out now, and handed it to her. 'It wasn't the man on the right, was it? The one in the suit?'

She looked at it closely for a few seconds. In the photo, the Slap had a cap with him but was holding it in his hand rather than wearing it. His bald dome seemed to stand out a mile.

Finally, she looked up. 'You know, I think it is. I can't be a hundred per cent sure - it's not a brilliant photo, is it? But, yes, it looks a great deal like him.'

Interesting. 'You've been here for how long, Mrs Deerborne?'

'My husband and I bought this place ten years ago. I think it cost us about a third of what it would go for now.'

That seems to be the case for most of London. And how long has Mr Franks been your next-door neighbour?'

'A long time.' She appeared to think about it for a moment. Three or four years at least, probably longer. Why? What is it you think he's done?' She iiiiffed loudly. 'I'm dying to know.' I told her politely that I couldn't divulge that. I hope it's nothing to do with what happened to that poor paperboy. The one who got killed.'

I smiled reassuringly. 'No, it's a separate matter entirely. Did Mr Franks live there alone?'

'I saw people come and go occasionally, but as far as I know it was just him in there. He wasn't always there either. He'd be away for a few weeks at a time sometimes.'

'Did he ever tell you what he did for a living? I mean, it's an expensive house.'

'I know he rented it but I don't know how much for. A lot, I suppose. But no, he never said what his job was. He tended to keep himself to himself. He'd talk if you talked to him, and he always said hello, but I don't think I had more than half a dozen conversations with him in all the time he was here, and not one of them lasted more than two or three

minutes. Usually they were about the weather or something mundane like that.'

'Do you know who owns the house?'

Tes, his name's Roddy Lee Potter. He's owned it for years. I know because he's come round here a couple of times, trying to buy our place. I think he owns a few houses in London. It's how he makes his money.'

I asked her if she had a phone number or an address for Mr Lee Potter and, after a bit more hunting around, it turned out she had both. She wrote them down on a sheet of paper and handed it to me. 'I don't know why we bothered keeping his details,' she said. 'It's not as if we'd ever consider selling. We love it round here.'

'I can see why,' I said, getting to my feet. 'It's a ^ nice area.' I put out my hand and she shook it | vigorously. Thank you very much for your help, Mrs Deerborne. It's most appreciated. If Mr Franks does for some reason turn up, can you call me on this number straight away?' I handed her my card.

Tes, of course,' she said, leading me back to the front door.

'I hope your cold improves,' I told her as I stepped outside.

'I'm sure it will. They never did catch the man who killed the paperboy, did they?'

'No,' I said. 'We didn't. But one day we will. We always get them in the end.'

When I was back out on the street I phoned Benin and brought him up to date. 'I've got a couple more

visits to make/ I told him. 'We'll meet back at the

station. Do me a favour, can you check on a car registration for me?' I reeled out the number.

'Do you think you might have something then, Sarge?' he asked.

'I don't know. Possibly. Do me another favour as well, will you? Speak to Capper and Hunsdon. See how the interview went with Jean Tanner.'

When I'd rung off, having given Benin plenty of things to do for the morning, I suddenly felt guilty. There I was, supposedly teaching the poor kid the ropes of CID, and instead I was dumping all the routine stuff on him and going my own way. I made a conscious decision to be more inclusive in future. But for now, I needed to move fast.

I'd turned my mobile off for the duration of the u.c.ting with Judy Deerborne, a long-standing habit since interruptions always messed up my thought process, and I now saw that I had a message. It was Malik returning my call, and he'd only phoned ten minutes ago. I pressed 5 for callback and waited while the phone rang. Malik was a sod of an individual to get hold of so I had to make the best of the opportunities I had.

He picked up on the fourth ring. 'Hello, John, I've just tried to phone you.'

'The know. You got my message, didn't you, and the emails I sent you?'

'That's right.'

'The guy in fatigues in the photo with Jack Merriweather. We've identified him as a Tony Franks. He's been living at 41F Runmayne Avenue in Highbury Fields for the past few years. Do you know anything about him?'

Tes, I do,' he said. 'He was suspected of being involved in drug-running for the Holtzes out of eastern Europe, where he'd built up a lot of contacts. He was brought in for questioning and put under surveillance for a while in 1998, mainly because of that article in Der Spiegel, but nothing ever came of it. In the end, apart from that photo and two or three other snippets of information, there was no real hard evidence to speak of. Franks has also been seen with Merriweather at least twice in the past few months, but then so have a hundred other people. We've got nothing concrete on him.'

The address he's been living at doesn't ring a bell, then?'

'Not off the top of my head. I'll have a look for you, but I don't think so.'

I was undeterred. 'It's a decent place in a nice area. The rent must be two grand a month, absolute minimum, probably more. As far as I can tell, this guy Franks's job was as a part-time bodyguard, so someone else must have been paying for it. The question is, why?'

Malik sighed. 'You're right. It does seem an odd set-up, even if he is linked to organized crime.'

'Listen, let me run something by you. It's strange, it might even be outlandish, but it's something that's bugging me.' I looked up and down the quiet street. A brand-new-looking BMW 7-Series drove slowly past in the direction of the Holloway Road. 'And, you know, the more I think about it, the more I think there's something in it.'

'Go on.'

So I told him, and when I'd finished Malik said that I was right, it was outlandish.

'But if there is something in it, think of the possibilities. Think of what it could do to help you against the Holtzes.'

Talk to the landlord,' said Malik. 'Find out how he gets paid every month and where the money comes from.'

Wednesday, four days ago

Gallan

Roddy Lee Potter lived in a swanky apartment situated on the ground floor of an attractive Georgian townhouse just off Kensington High Street. When I'd finally got him to answer the phone the previous day he'd been in a bar in Soho, sounding extremely drunk. We'd arranged to meet today at midday at Roddy's place, but I'd phoned ahead to make sure he hadn't forgotten our conversation, which he had. He'd wanted to postpone, the hangover in his voice obvious, but I wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily and insisted we keep the time as arranged.

I got there ten minutes early and was buzzed in straight away. The door to the apartment was opened by a large, red-faced gentleman with curly, greyish-black hair who looked like he hadn't been out of bed that long. He was dressed in a crumpled pair of slacks and a short-sleeved shirt.

'Detective Sergeant Gallan, please come in.'

I followed him inside and through to a lavishly

furnished but very messy lounge. It looked like the cleaner hadn't been in for a few days. Lee Potter motioned me to a leather armchair and I sat down, wrinkling my nose at the three-quarters-full pub sized ashtray on the table beside him, the smell reminding me why I'd chosen to give up all those years ago.

'Would you like some coffee?' he asked.

I said I would, and waited while he went to get it. He seemed a genial enough chap, but then I guess you would be pretty genial if you lived an easy, relatively wealthy life from rental income, and had no responsibilities. Was I jealous? What do you think? Of course I was.

When Lee Potter came back with the coffees, he asked how he could be of assistance. 'I hope I'm not in trouble for anything,' he added in a tone that was a little bit too ingratiating, and sat down opposite me.

'No, but it's something you might be able to help with. You've been renting a house out to a Mr Tony Franks?'

He nodded his head. That's right. He moved out a couple of weeks ago.'

'How long's he been renting from you?'

'About four years now, something like that.'

'Can I ask how much you charged him in rent?'

Lee Potter looked taken aback. 'Is it strictly necessary to know that? What's it got to do with anything?'

'I'm trying to build up a picture/ I said, 'and this information's an important part of it.'

Two thousand two hundred a month. I probably

could have got more but he was an easy tenant, and they're not all like that, I can tell you.'

'How many properties do you rent out, Mr Lee Potter?'

Tour altogether.'

'I expect they make you a tidy little income, don't they?'

Lee Potter smiled nervously. 'It's not bad. Not bad at all.'

'No, I bet it isn't.' My tone was deliberately suspicious. Lee Potter struck me as a weak character, someone you could push. 'What does Mr Franks do for a living?'

'I believe he owns his own company. I'm not sure what it does, though. As long as he paid the rent on time--'

'... Then you didn't ask too many questions. How many times have you met Mr Franks?'

'Er, I don't know. Not many. Two or three times at most.'

'In four years?' I raised my eyebrows.

'There was never any need to see him more than that.'

'He lived there alone, did he?'

Lee Potter nodded, clearly flustered by my rapid-fire questions. 'As far as I know, yes. That's right.'

'Where did the money come from?'

What do you mean?'

'Did he pay you directly or did it come from someone else?'

'His company paid. They used to send a cheque here every month, and they were always on time.'

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That's why I never bothered too much. Is there something wrong?'

I ignored the question. 'Did he leave a forwarding address when he moved out?'

'No, no he didn't. In fact he never actually came round at all. I got a phone call from his brother saying that he'd gone, and asking what was owed. I was concerned because obviously it was all a bit sudden, so he suggested I go round and check that everything was OK. I did, the house all looked very clean, and then he phoned back a couple of days later, we divvied everything up, and the company sent another cheque for the balance.'

'Did his brother leave a phone number you could reach him on?'

Ik shook his head. 'No, he didn't. He--'

'So you couldn't actually say for certain that it was his brother?'

'Well, no, but there was no reason to believe otherwise. Why should there have been?'

The reason I'm asking is that we want to talk to Mr Franks about some very serious matters, and I'm particularly interested in details of any of his associates.'

'As I said, Mr Gallan, I only ever met him a couple of times, and that was alone. He was a model tenant in pretty much every way. He never called me out, never complained, nothing. Just paid his rent and that was it.'

I paused for a moment and took several sips from my coffee before speaking again. Was there ever any suspicion on your part that the house was being used for anything other than simply being lived in?'

Lee Potter tried to look like he was thinking hard about the question. It didn't really work. "No, not really/ he said eventually.

'Are you absolutely sure? It's very important we know about it if there was.'

He sighed. 'I once went round there, I don't know, about a year or so ago, mainly because I hadn't even seen the place for God knows how long, and I was in the area anyway.'

'Go on.' m

'It was nothing really, but all the curtains were closed, which I thought was a bit odd as it was the middle of the day, and there were also a couple of cars there. Anyway, I rang on the doorbell a couple of times, but no-one answered,' He paused before continuing. 'Only, I was sure there were people there, because there was a tiny gap in the sitting- §| room curtains and I was certain I saw the shadow of someone moving around in there. It was probably nothing, almost certainly nothing, but I phoned Mr Franks up a couple of days later and he made out that he'd been away, which was odd.' He shrugged expansively. 'But that's about it. I can't think of anything else. What do you think was happening there, then?'

'I don't know,' I said, but I had my ideas.

I finished the coffee, got the name of the company that paid Franks's bills from Lee Potter, and then left.

Outside, the sky was darkening and it was already raining, but I hardly noticed as I started off in the direction of the Tube station. I was too busy thinking.

Twelve hours later my thoughts had turned to very different matters. Like why wasn't the chief super traipsing round the rain-drenched midnight streets of Islington if he was so bloody keen to 'foster a continued and ever deeper spirit of cooperation' between those pounding the beat and those who'd hoped it was all behind them? It was ten past five and we'd just been called to the ground floor council maisonette currently occupied by Brian and Katrina Driscoll.

The smell hit me in the face as soon as I followed Berrin and the two uniforms in through the open front door. Shit and GO and stale rubbish. Food that V > aH gone off, trapped stagnant air; the standard, cii-j-pervading odour of decay. A kid of about eight dressed in filthy pyjama bottoms, his ribs sticking out like they were going to burst through the skin, stood watching us impassively at the bottom of the stairs. It was dark in the hallway but there were lights on further in.

A hysterical wailing came from one of the rooms down the hall. The voice was female. She sounded drunk. 'I can't believe you fucking did that to me, you fucking cunt!'

'Fuck off you old slag or you'll fucking get some more!'

She screamed again. 'Fuck off!'

Then him. 'Do you want some, then? Do you fucking want some?'

There was a sound of glass or crockery breaking and the first uniform, PC Ramsay, called out that it was the police responding to a call. We walked

down the hall in a long line to the kitchen, past the boy who continued to stare at us blankly. 'I fucking called you! Look what he did to me!' She came into view, a big, misshapen woman in jeans and a white vest that rode up over her ample belly. A thick trail of blood ran down her face and onto her neck. Its source was a large cut on her forehead where she'd clearly been struck by something. She grabbed hold of Ramsay and pulled him to her like a sexually aggressive bear. 'Look what the cunt did to me! Look!'

The WPC with Ramsay, Fames, shepherded the victim into the lounge away from her partner, who now appeared, bare-footed, in the kitchen doorway. 'I ain't done fucking nothing/ he said, shaking his head, the words oozing drink. He was tall with a thick head of messy brown hair and an out-of-proportion beer belly. Aged about thirty-five, and dressed in jeans and a checked shirt. We'd been warned he was violent, particularly when drunk. Apparently, the police had been called here plenty of times before.

'Come on now, Brian,' said Ramsay, who seemed to know him. 'I think it's best you come with us.' The words were spoken calmly, almost soothingly. Ramsay was understandably eager to avoid a scene. I was too, since I'd have to get involved if he didn't come quietly.

His response, however, was predictable. 'Fuck off. I'm all right. I didn't touch her. She's fucking lying again.'

Brian came forward, trying to get into the room where his partner was. Ramsay stood in the way

and put his hands up to stop him. 'She's made a complaint, Brian. Now we've got to follow up on it. You understand that, don't you?'

'Fuck off. Get out my way.'

'Look, don't make this hard on everyone, Brian. Let's just go nice and quiet now.'

Brian lunged forward and I did my best to grab him in a bearhug from behind while Berrin managed to get him round the neck. Ramsay produced some handcuffs from out of nowhere and the three of us wrestled him towards the front door.

Two more recently arrived uniforms came in and helped with what was no easy extraction. Brian cursed and screamed, then fell over, trying to lash out- with his arms. I grabbed one, one of the uiuiuinis grabbed another, and Ramsay forced on the cuffs.

What are you fucking doing to me, you cunts!
Leave me alone! Bastards!'

I looked up and saw the kid on the stairs still watching the whole thing, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to see your dad wrestling with a load of police officers. The man reeked of sweat and his hair was greasy. I had my knee in his back and I felt this sudden urge to grab him by the back of his greasy mane and slam his head into the floor.

Till fucking kill you, you bastards! You're dead!
You know that? Dead!'

We pulled him to his feet and he snorted loudly, filling his mouth with phlegm.

'All right, get rid of that spit,' demanded one of the uniforms in his line of fire. 'Get rid of it now.'

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'Come on now, Brian, let's be having you,' continued Ramsay, persisting with his softly-softly approach.

Brian gobbled something thick and horrible onto his carpet, deciding against sending it into one of the arresting officers' faces and risking a charge of assault, and continued with his pointless invective. We got him outside on the pavement and, while one of the uniforms got the doors of the van open, he had a final angry struggle, just to show he wasn't coming quietly, and tried to kick Benin who dodged out of the way. I grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him back.

'Fuck off, you fucking wanker!' he shouted, and lashed out again with a bare foot, this time in my direction.

I stepped aside, then stepped back and stamped hard on his other foot, grinding the heel of my shoe in. Brian howled in pain and I felt a momentary burst of satisfaction.

'Did you see what he fucking did, the cunt? Did you fucking see?'

I turned away as he was manhandled into the back of the van and cursed myself for losing control. I'd forgotten what these lowlife domestics were like, and how irritating drunks could be. Still, that was no excuse for rising to the bait. As much as anyone, I knew the possible long-term consequences of a two-second loss of control.

'Nice one, Sarge,' said Benin, giving me a pat on the back.

Another patrol car had arrived now and two more officers went into the house. The van

containing the prisoner remained where it was while Ramsay and the other two officers chatted among themselves, ignoring the steady rain that beat down from the night sky.

I didn't say anything. I was pissed off. It struck me as ridiculous that Benin and I should be sent out on worthless exercises like this that did nothing to bolster morale or understanding, while every effort possible was being made to squeeze the life out of the Matthews murder squad. Capper and Hunsdon had now gone over to the aggravated burglary inquiry involving the pregnant woman, and I'd even had difficulty holding on to Benin. Knox had lost interest in the case. Particularly now there was no evidence to back up his theory of a Matthews/Iversson partnership. Maybe if the Crimewatch mugshot helped to flush out Iversson, things would change, but for the moment Matthews's murder was slipping down the endless list of priorities.

The sound of a baby crying came from inside and I walked back in. The kid on the stairs had gone, and the two officers who'd just arrived were talking in the doorway of the room where WPC Fames had taken the victim, who was still sobbing and cursing. Since no-one else seemed bothered about the crying baby, I mounted the stairs, wrinkling my nose against the smell, and walked onto the landing. I found a light switch, flicked it on, then went to the door where the crying was coming from.

The smell when I opened it was foul, fetid. I had to work hard to stop myself from gagging as I switched on the lights.

The room was a cramped mess of toys, boxes, tissues, all sorts. It was difficult to make out the floor in places. In the corner was a cot, and in the cot was a baby of no more than six months, naked except for a nappy and crying hysterically. The stench of shit was horrendous, and I saw that a lot of the tissues were stained brown with it.

I walked over to the cot, the smell getting worse with each step, and looked down at the crying infant. He or she had sores round the thighs where the nappy, which looked almost full to bursting, must have been chafing. I wanted to turn round and walk out of there, and I could have done, too there was nothing to stop me. It wasn't my business if this family, and I used the term loosely, couldn't look after their own. But it wasn't the kid's fault either so, steeling myself against the smell, I leant down and picked it up. My hands immediately felt wet and slimy and I knew without looking that they were covered in shit. Grimacing, I turned the baby over and saw that the nappy had leaked and the stuff was all up the poor little kid's back. No wonder it had been crying, having to lie helpless in its own waste. Nobody had changed this nappy for hours, possibly days.

'Whatchoo doing with her?' came a hostile voice from the doorway.

I turned to see the kid who'd watched us come in standing in the doorway. 'Trying to change her/ I said. 'Find me some wipes or a tissue, will you?' The kid didn't move. 'Look, do as I say. I'm trying to help her.'

As the kid rummaged through the crap on the

floor, I laid the baby on her front and removed the nappy/ using it to mop up the worst of the stuff that clung to her. I folded it up and put it on the floor, for want of a better place. 'Here y'are,' said the kid, handing me a half-used roll of toilet paper. Not quite what I had in mind, but at least it was clean.

Thanks/ I said, continuing the grim process. 'Do me a favour, will you? Wet some of these tissues as well, and see if you can find a cloth. If you do get one, put soap and water on it, and bring it in.'

'Is she all right?' asked the kid.

'Yeah, she's fine. I think she was feeling a bit neglected.'

The kid came back a few moments later with a i_i < mi and two wet bundles of tissues. 'Right, see that plastic bag over there?' The kid nodded. 'Put the dirty nappy in it, then bring it back here so I can chuck this stuff in it.' The kid did as he was told, and I thought he'd probably make a good assistant.

When I'd finished making the baby half presentable, the kid and I hunted round for a clean nappy, finding a bag of them in the corner. 'Have you ever changed your sister before?' I asked him.

'Course I have,' said the kid.

'Good. What's her name?'

'Karen.'

We cleared a place on the floor, then I lifted her out of the cot and put her down gently on her back. 'OK, Karen. Your brother's going to change you now, while I go and sort myself out.'

I found the poky little bathroom and washed my hands thoroughly in the dirty sink. There were a load of hairs clogging up the plughole - hopefully

from heads, but it wasn't that easy to tell - and I thought that this woman and her partner deserved absolutely no sympathy whatever. They behaved worse than animals - which was fine if that's how they wanted to live, but to ruin their kids' lives too, that for me was unforgivable.

I went back into the bedroom and helped the kid with the rest of the nappy. Then we both put Karen back into her cot. She was still crying.

'What's your name?' I asked him.

'Dean,' he said.

'I think Karen might be hungry, Dean. You go to bed now, and I'll sort out some feed for her.'

The kid disappeared without a word and I walked wearily back down the stairs, thinking that he didn't really have a chance with parents like that. Neither of them did. The ambulance had arrived for the mother and they were tending her wounds in the lounge while WPC Fames looked on. The mother was wailing drunkenly and I found it hard not to hate her for her selfishness.

'Your baby needs feeding,' I told her. 'I presume she's on bottled milk.'

There was a commotion outside the front door and Benin walked inside, talking excitedly to PC Ramsay. He saw me and immediately came over. 'Sarge, we've got an all units out. There's been a shooting.'

'You'd better wait here until social services arrive,' I told Fames. 'And sort out the baby's feed, can you?' Fames tried to say something but I wasn't listening. 'Where's this shooting at?'

'Heavenly Girls.'

It's true I stood to make a lot of money from the abduction of Krys Holtz, but I'll tell you this, I was going to earn every fucking penny of it.

It was our third night in a row outside Heavenly Girls, and tempers were fraying, particularly mine. It was Johnny Hexham. He was driving me mad. /Her two nights stuck in the back, I'd finally decided to risk sitting in the front where it was a lot more comfortable. I now had a full beard, and with a cap on and a pair of specs, I looked a lot different than I had two weeks back. In fact the look quite suited me, to tell you the truth. Showed my intollpctual side.

uui unfortunately there was no escaping Johnny, who'd spent the night constantly trying to weasel information out of me about what we were doing on this street, and coming up with all these theories, some of which veered dangerously close to the truth. Not to mention the complications of his love life, which he insisted on going on and on about even though I wasn't in the least bit fucking interested. Apparently, his ex-girlfriend Delia was pregnant, the result of a flying visit by Johnny to pick up some CDs he'd left there, but she was already shacked up with some seventeen-stone black bloke who thought the baby was his and who was going to have something of a shock come the happy day. Delia wanted to run away with Johnny, who it turned out she still felt something for, and was threatening to tell the boyfriend Johnny had raped her if he didn't. But Johnny, not surprisingly,

wanted nothing further to do with her, and was getting worried that any day now he was going to receive a leg-breaking visit from half a dozen of the boyfriend's mates. Also, he had another serious girl now, Amanda, who he'd met at Arcadia some weeks before, and who he was really smitten with. Matters were further complicated, if you could believe it, by the fact that Amanda was vigorously bisexual and wanted Johnny to share her with her other lover, German student Beatrix. Sp

'The problem is, Beatrix is, like, a full-on ** Magnus.'

'A what?'

'Magnus Pike, dyke. She wouldn't touch a dick if her life depended on it, so there's no way of, you know, having a bit of fun with both of them together, which would definitely have helped to numb the pain of having to share her. But I don't want to lose Amanda. I don't know what I'd do if she pulled the plug on it. But it's a bit of an odd fucking way to run a relationship, isn't it?'

'You know, Johnny/1 said, taking a swig from my bottle of mineral water, 'you are the only thirty four-year-old I know who complains that he gets laid too much.'

'It's not like that, Max. Honest. I really love her, but I know what's going to happen. Beatrix is going to make her choose between us.'

'So buy her some flowers or something. Get in there first.'

'No, Max, you don't understand.'

'I know I fucking don't.'

'Amanda says there's something special about

girl-on-girl love. It's more gentle than the stuff you get with a bloke, more sort of tender. Do you know what I mean?'

'Not really, Johnny, no. I've never really thought about it, to tell you the truth. I've seen women at it with each other in porno films, though, and they always seem to be enjoying themselves.'

'I tell you, Amanda swears by it. Says it's the only way for her to achieve a multiple orgasm. There's no way she's going to turn down that sort of action, is there? Which means it'll be me who gets the old heave ho. It's making my life a fucking misery, it really is.'

'I'm sure there are millions of blokes out there
"ho really sympathize.'

i turned away and stared out the window in the direction of Heavenly Girls, a hundred yards away down the road. It was raining steadily again, which at least was helpful. We'd been parking on the same stretch of road night after night, so we had to be careful about the amount of attention we attracted. Every wasted night increased the risks, not to mention the stiff-legged, claustrophobic boredom of it, blunting our senses and making reaction times just that little bit slower - something that could prove fatal in this sort of operation.

Johnny continued to rattle on about Amanda, Beatrix, Delia and all his other birds, but I was blanking him totally now. I had enough worries of my own. The waiting around was beginning to lead to the first rumblings of discontent from the others. Kalinski had suggested that snatching him from a place he only visited periodically, and with no

obvious advance warning, was tempting fate, which was true I suppose, but there were no other suitable venues. Joe hadn't helped matters either by remarking, after we'd finished a frustrating four and-a-half-hour stint the previous night during which Kalinski had stunk the place out by shitting in a Tesco carrier bag, that maybe it might be an idea to knock the whole thing on the head. I knew Joe was feeling a bit spooked thanks to his almost daily visits from the Law, but I hoped it was just the frustration talking. If he - or, to be honest, any of us - pulled out then the whole thing was bolloxed and I'd be back to square one. On the run, skint, and with the near rape of my girlfriend unavenged.

I took another swig from the water as Johnny recounted how Beatrix was the dominant partner in the lesbian relationship even though she wasn't good-looking at all, and was, in his opinion, bullying Amanda into dropping him. 'She's got whips and chains and everything,' he explained, shaking his head. 'Apparently, her gaff's like a fucking torture chamber. She's even got a selection of butt plugs. How's Amanda meant to resist?' In the back of the van, I could hear movement as they shuffled about trying to make themselves comfortable.

A Land Cruiser pulled up outside the brothel. It looked familiar. The time was ten to midnight.

'Are you listening, Max, or are you fucking ignoring me?' Johnny whined.

Krys Holtz, Big Mick and Fitz stepped out, and the car did a U-turn and pulled away, driving past us. It looked like the driver was Slim Robbie, and I wondered if he'd be coming back.

'I'm ignoring you, Johnny/ I told him, watching as Krys and his men rang the buzzer, and a couple of seconds later went inside. Johnny hadn't seen them, which suited me fine. If he'd had half an inkling that our job was to kidnap Krys Holtz, he would have been out of the van faster than Wile E. Coyote and running all the way back to Amanda, Dolia, even Beatrix and her butt plugs, without stopping.

'I thought you was a mate of mine/ said Johnny, sounding put out, but I hardly heard him. My blood was up, and like a youthful Elvis I was ready to rock and roll.

The banged three times in quick succession on the vt.u t > interior panel, then twice slowly, the signal that they'd arrived. Three more bangs came back to acknowledge that the message had been received and understood.

'Sorry, Johnny, but we've got work to do. Start driving.'

Johnny pulled the Mercedes van away from the kerb and drove slowly along the road until he was about fifteen yards past the entrance to Heavenly Girls.

'All right, stop here/ I told him. 'Double park/

'Can you tell me what's going on now, Max?'

'No.'

I banged on the interior panel twice to let them know we were in position. The back doors opened and I saw Tugger Lewis in the wing mirror as he walked up the steps to the entrance. It was on.

I pressed the stopwatch and watched it as the seconds ticked by, knowing that this was it, the big

one. Just like the old days. All my senses fusing together into one single core of absolute concentration. It's life or death, this. Nothing's got higher stakes. You fuck up, you die. Your life ends, just like that. Kaput! You're history. But nothing beats it either. Nothing ever beats the pure adrenalin rush, the intensity, the sheer joy of battle. I bet not even one of Amanda's multiple orgasms comes close.

Thirty seconds. Forty. Johnny said something to me, but I couldn't hear him. His voice was just interference, meaningless. Fifty seconds. Time to go. I banged the interior panel five times in quick succession, put the stopwatch in my pocket, and stepped out of the van. I pressed my mouth against the half-open window. 'Stay here/ I said. 'Do not move.'

I turned away before he could answer and walked towards the front entrance of the brothel, Joe and Kalinski coming up beside me. Joe had a holdall over his shoulder. No-one spoke. As we walked, we took black balaclavas from the pockets of our regulation blue boiler suits, and pulled them over our heads. The rain was coming down in sheets and the street was empty. We didn't look suspicious, we just looked like three normal kidnappers.

Kalinski pressed the buzzer and the door clicked open straight away. So Tugger had the reception area under control. Good. Part one had at least gone to plan. We stepped into the lift, and Joe put the holdall on the floor and took two automatic shotguns with sawn-off barrels out of it, handing one to

Kalinski. He then pulled out a dozen spare shells which he stuck in one of the pockets of his boiler suit before replacing the holdall on his shoulder. We didn't want to leave any evidence behind. While he was doing this, I produced the Clock, gave it a quick check, and chambered a round. We were ready.

The lift opened directly into the reception area and the three of us stepped out, weapons at the ready. Tugger was standing there in his suit, balaclava on, in front of a good-looking young receptionist with strawberry blonde hair. She had her hands flat down on the desk in front of her. Tugger was facing her but pointing his gun at two ^roll-built doormen in dickie bows - one white, one bicick - both of whom had their hands arrow straight above their heads, their faces suggesting there was no way they were going to be heroes. I couldn't blame them. Being a hero can be a very overrated pastime. And you don't even get paid.

The receptionist's eyes widened when she saw us come striding in and she looked like she was going to scream. Tugger put a finger to his lips. 'Now now, pet, don't go causing a scene. No-one wants to hurt a pretty little thing like you. Just tell us which room Krys Holtz is in.'

I saw the white doorman's eyes widen, like he couldn't believe we'd be messing around with someone like Krys Holtz. Believe it, my friend. Believe it.

'He's in the Lovers Suite on the next floor up/ she stammered, keen to co-operate. 'It's the second door on your left when you come out of the lift.'

What about the other two with him?'

'I don't know which rooms they'll be in, but they'll be on the same floor. They always stay close together.'

Tugger pulled her to her feet while Joe and me! handcuffed the two bouncers under the watchful eye of Kalinski. When they were secured, and' Tugger had got hold of the CCTV tape, wi shepherded the three of them towards the room to our left. At the same time a potbellied businessmanSB emerged from it on the arm of a stunning-looking oriental girl.

'Ohmigod!' whispered the girl. The businessman simply stood there, looking surprised.

I raised the gun and pushed them back into the3^ room, following them in. Two more men in suits sat -- in the corner with two equally stunning and scantily clad women, while another girl sat at the j; bar talking to the lone barman, a baby-faced guy in his early twenties. All eyes went to the door as our unusual-looking convoy entered, but no-one was stupid enough to cry out.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' I said in my best public speaking voice as we ushered everyone into the far corner of the room, 'you have nothing to fear. We are here to collect a debt from an individual within J the building, and are interested in that man only. If you do as you're told and co-operate, no-one will be hurt and we'll be out of your hair within a few minutes.' I motioned to the barman with my gun. 'You, get over in the corner with the rest of them.. And you.' The girl sitting at the bar scowled at me but did as she was told, as did the barman.

It was exactly three minutes and fifteen seconds from the moment Tugger had entered the building, and so far things were running smoothly.

Kalinski was tasked with guarding those in the bar, so ne stepped forward and stood blankly watching his charges, shotgun pointed towards them, while the rest of us exited and headed up to the next floor, using the stairs behind the reception area Trigger was leading because he'd gone up that Way the other night. When he got to the next floor, he slowly opened the door and looked down the corridor, then turned and gave us the all clear. We followed him in, and Joe took up position by the lift where he could make sure no-one interfered wiffti things. Tugger and me crept quietly towards the c.ocond door on the left.

When we reached the Lovers Suite, Tugger stopped and listened at the door. The rooms were meant to be soundproofed but he could obviously hear something because he motioned for me to have a listen. I put my ear against the wood and immediately caught the noise of some serious humping. The girl was sounding like she was having the time of her life, which, for the money Tugger claimed it cost, was no great surprise. Holtz, meanwhile, was making these horrible grunting noises, sounding like something out of a wildlife documentary.

Tugger turned the handle very slowly and gently eased the door open. When it was six inches ajar the noise of the shagging was amplified several times over, and so far neither of them appeared to notice that they were being interrupted. Tugger used the

barrel of his gun to push it open further and, quietly as possible, we tiptoed inside.

The sight that greeted us was pretty fucking horrible, to say the least. Krys's hairy and surprisingly large arse viewed us like an angry cyclone from its position on the four-poster bed as pounded up and down, piston-like, while shapely legs sprouted out like feelers on either side. It was impossible to see the girl's face as it was almost completely enveloped by Krys's furry fanny. A few locks of blonde hair peeped out over one of his shoulders, and that was about it. I wondered if she could even breathe down there. I looked across at Tugger and he grinned at me beneath the balaclava. I grinned back. I was enjoying this.

The room itself was very flash-looking and not worthy of such a high-class establishment. A thick Moroccan shagpile carpet obscured the sound of our footsteps; as Tugger quietly closed the door and we crept up to the bed. Not that it was likely we would have been heard anyway above the noise being made. Krys was grunting like a herd of hungry pigs as pummelled his way down the home straight, only seconds from the finishing line.

'Aiiieeeee!' he wailed in a final flurry of activity, lifting his head up as he unloaded his milky cargo. 'Oooooofff!'

At that point, two things happened. The girl, her face red and sweaty, courtesy no doubt of being stuck in Krys Holtz's armpit for the previous five minutes, saw me standing over her. Her eyes widened and she went to scream. At the same time Tugger smacked Krys hard on the back of the head

with the handle of his gun. Krys let out a surprised gasp and rolled off the girl, moaning faintly.

I stuck the barrel of the Clock against the girl's head and told her not to cry out. 'We're not interested in hurting you, so if you keep quiet and do not say a word, everything will be fine. If you do cry out or raise the alarm at any point in the next ten minutes, then we will kill you. Understand? Nod once for yes.' She nodded frantically. 'Good. Now turn over, put your face into the pillow and be absolutely quiet.'

While I was speaking, Tugger whacked Krys again, just for good measure, before handcuffing his hands behind his back, encountering little resistance from the semi-conscious gangster. The gni JiJ as she was told and I handcuffed her, taking a long second to admire her beautifully rounded rear and ponder the question that has vexed so many observers down the ages: why is the female form so much more attractive than the male? And thinking that maybe Johnny's girlfriend Amanda had got the right idea.

What the fuck's going on?' moaned Krys while his eyes made a bad job of trying to focus.

'Shut the fuck up!' snapped Tugger, pulling him off the bed by the handcuffs and forcing him to his knees. He gave him a quick smack round the face with the barrel of the gun to establish control. 'Now, get to your feet. Now!'

'Fuck off,' snapped Krys. 'You know who you're rucking dealing with?'

'Course I do, you prick. Now shut it.'

Krys opened his mouth to say something else but

I came round the bed, bolstering my gun and pulling open a roll of adhesive tape. I bit off a piece and shoved it over his mouth while Tugger held his head still. Kry's face went red with rage and he started struggling wildly so I kicked him hard in the stomach, doubling him over. It was important to break him quickly so we could get out of the place with the minimum of fuss.

Tugger pulled him up by his hair and we manhandled him to the door. When we reached it, I * fished out the keys to the girl's handcuffs and chucked them on the bed. No point inconveniencing her any more than was necessary.

Kry was struggling again, and in his rage he managed to kick the door, making a little bit too much noise for my liking. So I grabbed him by his bollocks and yanked hard. Twice in quick J| succession. His eyes bulged and I could almost m smell his pain. I put my mouth close to his ear. ip
'Struggle again and I'll have the fucking things off/ M
I hissed. J

He seemed to get the message, and we pulled him out of the door without further incident. Joe was still standing at the end of the corridor next to the stairs, shotgun in hand. He nodded in acknowledgement as we came towards him. Kry turned to me as we walked and his eyes narrowed, the message in them clear. I stared right back, daring him to try anything.

Then, suddenly, it all went wrong.

A door swung open just behind us and a white haired geezer of at least sixty came out, saw what was going on, and shouted, 'Oh dear! What on

earth's happening?' in tones that made you think he half-expected us to turn round and tell him. However, he decided against waiting around for an answer and immediately jumped back into the room, slamming the door behind him. At this point we were ten feet from the stairs, and fifteen from the lift.

Krys, sensing the possibility of rescue, tried to slow up, dragging his heels along the floor, but I tugged on his nuts again while Tugger pushed the barrel of his gun hard against his face. It seemed to do the trick, and this time he didn't resist as we pushed him right up to the lift entrance. Joe had already called the lift and he pressed the button to open the door. At the same time, out of the corner of my eye, I saw another door open further down the corridor. A second later Big Mick's naked upper half emerged, wielding a handgun that was pointing in our direction.

There was a deafening roar as Joe pushed us aside and pulled the trigger on the shotgun. A huge chunk of skirting and wall disappeared and Mick leapt back out of sight. We immediately pushed Krys into the lift, and I kned him hard in the groin to minimize any further disruption. He went down to his knees and I turned and pointed the Clock back down the hall. Big Mick appeared again, his body crouched down, and let off a couple of wild shots. Joe and I held our ground and returned fire, sending dust and skirting flying in all directions. Tugger held on to Krys.

Then, without warning, the door opposite the Lovers Suite flew open and Fitz appeared in view

with a revolver in hand, firing wildly in our general direction. A bullet whizzed straight past my head and into the lift, narrowly missing Krys. It hit the full-length mirror at the lift's rear, shattering it instantly. Taking advantage of the covering fire, Mick also appeared again, firing off another series of rounds. Joe's shotgun erupted in return, blowing a huge hole in the doorway where Mick's head had just been, while Fitz was forced to retreat as I unloaded a steady burst of gunfire in his direction. I then jumped to one side and disappeared into the stairwell while Joe retreated into the lift as the doors closed.

I dashed down the first flight of stairs until I was in the second floor stairwell. The lift carrying Krys and the others was going all the way to the ground, and from there they were going straight into the back of the Mercedes van. My job now was to make sure Big Mick and Fitz didn't get a chance to balls anything up. I ejected the Clock's magazine and replaced it with a full one, chambering the first round. Above me the door on the next floor up banged open and heavy footfalls came down the stairs. Taking a deep breath, I stepped back so I was leaning against the door that led into the reception area, and raised the gun. Behind me, I could hear people crying out and shouting in the bar, and I hoped Kalinski was calm and ruthless enough to keep a lid on things until it was time for him to go.

Big Mick came crashing into view, dressed only in trousers, almost slipping up in his haste to get down the stairs and intercept the lift before it escaped with his boss. Fitz was right behind him.

Mick's eyes momentarily widened when he saw jne, but before he could react I pulled the trigger, holding the gun two-handed.

Mick never had a chance. He took a bullet in the gut, then the chest, then the neck, the force of the rounds knocking him back in the direction of the wall. He tottered for a moment, then fell heavily. Fitz dived out of the way, but I kept shooting, my bullets ricocheting off the carpet and taking chunks out of the paintwork. From his position lying on the stairs, and partially covered by his friend, Fitz returned fire, his bullets passing dangerously close. But I stayed calm, adjusted my aim, and hit him in the shoulder and chest as he sat up and tried to get a better shot at me. He fell back doⁱⁱ again with hardly a sound, and I turned and charged through the door and into the reception area. Kalinski was already retreating out of the bar, his weapon trained on the spot where I appeared. I gave him the thumbs up and the two of us went back into the stairwell where the bodies of Fitz and Big Mick lay sprawled above us, their blood mingling as it dribbled onto the carpet. Kalinski paused for a moment to view the men who'd almost certainly helped to murder his brother.

Then, without warning, Fitz sat back up, blood dribbling from the corner of the mouth, and aimed his weapon at us. There followed an excruciatingly long one-second pause, as if we were all just frozen there, and then I pulled the trigger. My first bullet missed but the second ripped the top of his head off, depositing a lump of something nasty on the wall behind. Fitz continued sitting where he was

for maybe a couple of seconds, then tipped straight back. I didn't need any more encouragement to get the hell out of there, and turned and charged down the stairs in the direction of the ground floor, Kalinski in hot pursuit.

The van was still double-parked with the engine idling when we got outside. We ran straight for it, pulling the balaclavas from our heads, Kalinski heading for the back, me for the front. In the distance we could hear the first faint sirens.

'What the fuck's going on?' howled Johnny as I jumped inside. 'I saw them shove some naked! geezer with an Elvis barnet in the back!'

The back door shut as Kalinski got in, and there were two knocks on the interior panel to tell us they were ready to go.

'Shut the fuck up and drive! Now!'

Johnny took one look at me, saw something in my face he didn't like, and did exactly what he was told.

Gallan

There were already at least a dozen police vehiclesⁱ and several ambulances double-parked along the street when Ramsay pulled up about fifty yards! down from the scene of the shooting. I pulled open; the side door of the van and stepped out into the! rain. I didn't wait for the others and started walk"ing down in the direction of the brothel, Benin following behind. The call had said that there'd been a serious shooting incident with several;

casualties, but it was the location that intrigued me. Heavenly Girls. The brothel Neil Vamen's girlfriend, the woman who had had nothing to say regarding the death of a man in her home, had worked in; the place in which the mysterious disappearing Roy Fowler had an alleged interest. Something was happening, and I desperately wanted to get a handle on what it was.

The front door of the brothel was under police guard, and in the doorway I could see a very concerned-looking DCI Knox with his back to the street, talking to someone. The person came into view as we mounted the steps, and I was pleased to see that it was Asif Malik.

Knox and Malik turned round as we approached

'Hello, John/' said Knox grimly. 'Dave/' he added, nodding towards Berrin. 'You both know Asif, don't you?'

'I do, Dave doesn't/' I said. We stepped out of the rain, then did the introductions. 'So, what's happened?' I asked.

'A double murder/' said Knox.

'Off the record/' said Malik, 'they're both associates of Krys Holtz: Danny Fitzgerald and Mick Noble. According to the witnesses here, a number of masked men came in, shot the two of them, and then, from what we can gather, abducted Krys himself.'

'Shit/' was the only reply I could manage.

'Exactly. God only knows what this is going to lead to.'

'We think the Serious Crime Group are going to

be taking this case, John/ said Knox, sounding not entirely unrelieved by the prospect, "but we're going to need some help taking statements. There must be thirty people up there we've got to talk to, quite a few of whom are not going to want to cooperate very much.'

'Sure, no problem. We'll get on to it.'

Knox nodded, and headed up the stairs to the reception area. 'I'd better get up there too/ said Malik.

'Before you do, can I grab a moment?' I asked.

'It'll have to be quick/ he answered. 'This little lot has really complicated things.'

'It will be.' I turned to Benin. 'I'll meet you up there, Dave.' Berrin looked put out but didn't say anything and did as he was told.

I took Malik by the arm and led him to the far corner of the foyer. 'I spoke to the landlord/ I told him, giving him a brief synopsis of what had been said. 'Something was going on in that house, something very illegal.'

'And you haven't been able to get hold of this Franks guy?'

'Not a word. He's disappeared, just like Roy Fowler, who, for your information, apparently had a share in this place.'

That's interesting, except it still doesn't prove anything. Whatever was going on in that house won't be going on now, and if there's no evidence of a criminal enterprise taking place, there's not a lot we can do.'

'Does the company name mean anything to you? Dagmar Holdings?'

'John, the Holtzes have God knows how many front companies washing their money. I honestly can't remember them all individually. But I promise I'll look into it for you.'

I could tell that Malik was beginning to think of me as an irritant, and I could hardly blame him. I might have unearthed a few matters that needed explanation, but in the end I had absolutely nothing concrete, and it was the concrete stuff that any police officer needed.

'You know, Asif, you're always looking for a way into the Holtzes. If what I spoke about to you yesterday ... If that actually happened, think what it could mean. Someone would definitely open his mouth.'

Ifs and maybes, John. At the moment the most important thing is trying to prevent some sort of gang war breaking out, and that means finding out which madmen decided it would be a good idea to snatch Krys Holtz.'

'Do me one favour.'

'What?'

I'm going to ask DCI Knox to authorize a full search of Franks's house for any traces that might back up my theory. I'd like to add that I've got your support for it as well. Please. If I can turn something up, I'm sure it'll help your investigations. If I don't, then it's no loss to you.'

Malik thought about it for a moment, then, deciding that it was probably easier to agree than put up with more hassle, said he would. 'But that's the extent of my involvement. Is that clear?'

'As daylight.' I patted him on the shoulder.
Thanks. I owe you one.'

;flt

It was two hours before Benin and I finished taking statements at Heavenly Girls. A number of the clientele and staff were severely traumatized, including one of the security people, a huge ex boxer who'd had the misfortune to witness what was left of the two shot men, and who now kept bursting into tears, so it hadn't been an easy task.

The rain had stopped by the time the two of us descended the steps to the street. The van we'd been travelling around in all night remained parked further up and I could make out Ramsay behind the wheel eating a sandwich, lazy bastard.

'Sarge?' said Benin as we walked along. |

I yawned. It was half two in the morning, a long 1 way past my bedtime. Tes, Dave?' J

'Have you got a problem with me?'

I stopped and looked at him, and realized how difficult I'd made things for him lately. 'Of course I haven't. I'm sorry about the last few days. I've been trying to follow up on a couple of theories I've got, and I suppose I didn't want to share them until they'd come to something.'

'But we're working together on this. I need to know what's happening otherwise I'm not going to be of any use to you at all.'

'No, I understand that.'

'So what was it you were talking to the SO7 bloke about?'

I sighed. 'A theory I'm working on, but a real

vague one.' And it was vague, too, but I was sure there was something in it.

Benin lit a cigarette. Well, let's hear it then. You never know, I might even be able to help.'

So I told him. By the time I'd finished talking, it had started to rain again. What do you think?' I asked, wondering if I was really any good at man management.

Benin finished his cigarette and chucked it in the gutter. 'I think I hope it isn't right because if it is then it's a gruesome chain of events. But it wouldn't totally surprise me, you know. I reckon it's got the ring of truth about it.'

'So do I/ I said. 'So do I.'

Thursday, three days ago

Iversson

It was just after nine a.m. and raining hard when I stepped into a phone box on Seven Sisters Road. I dialled the number of a restaurant owned by Stefan Holtz. A foreign-sounding gentleman answered on J| about the tenth ring. 'L'Espagnol/ he grunted miserably, which I thought was a bit cheeky. I might have been a punter looking to book a table, and that sort of tone would have put me right off.

Tell Stefan Holtz that the man from Heavenly Girls wants to get hold of him. He's got a message from Krys. I'm going to call this number back in fifteen minutes and I want to speak to him then.'

The guy on the other end didn't speak and I hung up, getting out of the phone box and walking along the street in the direction of Camden Road. Fifteen minutes later, I entered another phone box on York Road and dialled the L'Espagnol number again. This time it was answered on the first ring by the same guy as before. 'I've got a number to

ring/' he told me hurriedly. I wrote it down and rang off without further comment, then dialled it.

Four rings later and Stefan Holtz was on the line. 'Where the fuck's my son?' were his first words, delivered in a rough north London rasp that made me think I'd been daft to start smoking again.

'He's unhurt. If you want to see him again it'll cost you half a million quid in cash, used fifties. You've got twenty-four hours to come up with the money otherwise we'll chop his head off, and use his quiff as a bog brush.'

'If you fucking touch him, I'll rip you limb from limb.'

'I'm going to call back tomorrow morning at this Hme with further instructions.'

I need more fucking time/ said Holtz, the first signs of desperation in his voice. For all his money and influence, he was powerless in the current situation, and he knew it.

I put the phone down, confident that he'd follow the instructions he'd been set. The two bodies left behind the previous night should have been proof enough of that. I was pissed off that we'd had to kill two men to get what we wanted, particularly since the whole thing had almost gone completely to plan, but it was too late to worry about it now.

I hailed a cab and fifteen minutes later I was back at Elaine's apartment. I used the key she'd given me to let myself in and went up to the bedroom. The curtains were still closed and she was lying in bed, looking good. She opened her eyes and smiled when she saw me.

I grinned back at her. 'We did it.' And then,

coming forward towards the bed, 'We fucking did it!' She sat up and we clutched each other tightly. I pushed my face into her neck, revelling in her smell. And do you know what? I almost said I love you, but stopped myself just in time. It wasn't the moment for that yet.

'It's not over yet, hon.'

'No, but the worst part's sorted.'

'I saw on the news that two people got shot/ she said, easing herself away from my grasp. 'What happened?'

'They were Kry's associates. They tried to stop us, we had no choice.'

'Did you know that they've shown your mug on Crimewatch? I shook my head. 'It was on last night. I saw it.'

'How did I look?'

Tucking ugly, so better than usual. I hope your passport photo looks a lot different.'

'Don't worry. It'll look beautiful.'

'That'll take some work.'

'You know, Miss Toms, you're getting a little bit too disrespectful for my liking.' I removed my shirt and flung it on the floor.

'You need a suntan.'

'You need to be taught a lesson.'

'How's little Kry's doing?'

'Blindfolded and shackled in a cellar, on a diet of bread and water.'

'Good. Kick that bastard for me, will you?' She

pulled me towards her.

'I already have/ I said, tugging at my belt.

As I entered her, she asked me if I'd been the one

who'd pulled the trigger in Heavenly Girls. I told her I had been.

The sex was fantastic.

Gallan

Knox looked at Benin and me with a mixture of annoyance and confusion. We were in his office in the Matthews incident room, the last three people on the case, and it was eleven a.m.

'Explain this to me again/ he said, rubbing his eyes. 'We've all had a late night and I know I'm not quite with it this morning, but I'm sure you've just told me that your possible suspect in this inquiry is ^w lied in with the Jones murder.'

That's right,' I said, feeling that at this point I had nothing to lose. 'I wouldn't say I'm sure of it, but I've got enough suspicions to warrant a full search of the house, and I believe I can get the owner's permission.'

'How many murders are you trying to solve here?'

'As many as I can.'

Knox sat up in his seat and took a large gulp of coffee. 'If we send SOCO round, what do you think they're going to find?'

'Maybe nothing, but it's got to be worth a shot. The Jones case has ground to a halt, everyone knows that. Even the Essex police found nothing when they reviewed it. So, if we can be seen to be doing something it certainly won't do us any harm.'

'I don't want to raise the hopes of the family.
They're good people.'

'I know they are, but look at it like this. Robert Jones disappeared from that street one morning without anyone ever seeing him get taken. Now, that road's quite busy at that time, as we all know, "so that was unusual in itself.'

'Not that unusual.'

'If you'll let me finish, sir.' Knox motioned for me to go on. 'I checked the pathologist's notes again yesterday. Robert's clothing had been interfered with but there were no other signs of sexual assault. It was also noted that he was murdered elsewhere before being dumped, and that, because of the lack of signs of a struggle or defensive injuries, he probably died very quickly after being taken. But the most important thing is that there were no signs of him being bound or gagged.' i

Knox shrugged. 'We went over this during Jj the investigation. He could have been thrown in the ~~ back of a van from where it would have been impossible for him to get out, and driven somewhere isolated where the murderer could finish him off without having to worry about him making a noise.'

I knew this wasn't going to be easy. Knox had been, still was technically, the man leading the inquiry. He was not going to want to have the theory that had underpinned it, that it had been a predatory paedophile who'd killed Robert, taken away from under him. That's possible, yes/ I persisted, "but the thing is, we've never come close to finding the killer, and there's been no other

abduction and murder of a young boy anywhere in south-east England since. Or, for that matter, in the year leading up to it.'

'That doesn't necessarily mean anything, John. Robert Black was one of the worst predatory paedophiles of the last twenty years, and he often waited up to three or four years before re-offending.'

True, but we know, or are pretty certain, that the house on Runmayne Avenue that Tony Franks rented was being used for some sort of illegal purpose linked to one of north London's most dangerous crime families, and it's going to have to have been something pretty lucrative for the Holt/es to shell out that much in rent every month. What if Robert saw something that caught his eye that morning and went to take a closer look?'

'Like what?'

'I don't know,' I admitted, 'but let's say he goes up to the house, takes a look, as any inquisitive thirteen-year-old would, and sees something he shouldn't. He gets spotted, is taken inside the house, and he's then murdered because his killer or killers have no choice but to get rid of him. They then dump his body, making it look like a sex crime in an effort to cover their tracks. Just like they did with Miriam Fox that time. I know it may well not be the likeliest scenario but it's got to be a possibility.'

Knox sighed. 'I understand your desire to get a result on the Jones case, John. I know how much it affected you, all of us, but we're meant to be concentrating on the Matthews investigation.'

'I know, but let's face it, from what we've found out so far, the Holtzes or one or more of their associates had at least something to do with the murder of Matthews. Maybe Iversson's involved there too. And the problem we've got is it's difficult to get anyone to talk, but if somehow we can link members of their organization with what happened to Robert Jones, maybe we can loosen a few tongues and make some headway on both cases. No-one wants to protect child killers.'

'You know how much it costs to get a team to give a house a full once-over?'

'Yes, sir, it's a lot, but we've got a lead. It's not a great one but it's something, and on the Jones case particularly we haven't got any others, and haven't had for months. I know that SO7 are potentially interested in this too,' I added, trying to attach some authority to my request. 'It might give them a route into the Holtzes.'

'Maybe they should pay for the SOCO team, then.'

'It's still our case, sir.'

Knox sat there not saying anything, sipping thoughtfully on his coffee. I knew I'd boxed him into a corner. He could say no and claim there simply wasn't enough in what I was saying, but if he made that decision and then, at some point down the line, it turned out that this had indeed been what had happened to Robert Jones, the buck would stop with him. That was one of the problems with twenty-first-century policing. Such was the power of technology that important evidence could be found years after the event. Although this

could mean far more convictions, it also meant that the mistakes of police officers investigating crimes were forever open to exposure. Knox, like the consummate politician he was, decided to play it safe.

'What do you think, Dave?' he asked Benin.

'I think the sarge is right, sir. It's got to be worth looking into. And it may well help the Matthews r.^e.'

Knox finally nodded. 'All right, we'll go with it.'

Friday, two days ago

Iversson

'Have you got the money ready?'

'I told you, I need more time.'

'So you haven't?'

'Look, you don't know who you're fucking around with here. If you don't let him go, I'll be coming after you, you hear me?'

'I'm not listening. Now, you hear me. We'll start pulling your boy's fingernails out unless you do what we say, when we say it.'

'If you touch one fucking hair on his head--'

'Then what? What will you do exactly?'

'I will kill you. Understand that. I will find you and I will saw your fucking legs off.'

'Nothing'll happen to him if you give us the money we've requested. Why haven't you got it?'

'What guarantee have I got that he's even still alive?'

'There's no point us killing him. He hasn't seen our faces and he doesn't know who we are.'

'You hurt him and I'll hunt you down. There'll be no fucking hiding place.'

'You've said that already. It wasn't frightening the first time. Now, have you got the money or not? Answer me now.'

There was a pause. Teah, I've got the money.'

'Good. Now, listen carefully. At six-thirty p.m. tomorrow, be in the rear car park of the Post House Hotel on the Epping High Road. It's on the southern outskirts of Epping, just before the road crosses the M25. Have your mobile with you, as well as the money. And do not bring anyone else. Do you understand?'

'How do I know you're not going to have a pop at me?'

All I want's that money. Nothing else. Be at the Post House tomorrow and I'll call you then.'

I thought I was getting good at this as I stepped out of the phone box into the light morning drizzle.

Gallan

After much persuasion, I managed to push the DCI into organizing the SOCO team to start their painstaking work that Friday morning. I watched them arrive from across the street, hoping they would turn up something, however small, that could solve the murder of the thirteen-year-old paperboy.

The previous evening I'd gone round alone to Robert's parents' house to tell them of the new developments and to remind them not to get too

optimistic. They'd both nodded in understanding, and had thanked me for my help and my thoughtfulness in keeping them informed. I'd told them I was just doing my job, and Mrs Jones had put her hand on my arm and told me I was doing it well. And I'd thought then that, whatever happened with this lead, I would never stop until I found the person who'd killed their son and brought him to justice. It was why I was a copper. It was my vocation in life. The constant desire to give some sort of justice to people for whom fate had denied it. "£

I waited there for a long time as the white overalled SOCO officers strode in and out of 41F Runmayne Avenue with their various paraphernalia. Only when I was satisfied they were taking the job seriously, that they would scour the place until they'd covered every square inch of it, did I finally turn and make my way back to the station.

When I got back to the incident room, Benin was just coming off the phone. 'That was Martin Leppel,' he said, as I went and got myself a coffee.

'Has he got together that list of people we were after yet?' I knew Benin had been hassling him about it all week.

He nodded. 'Yeah, he faxed it through about an hour ago. That's what I was phoning him about.'

'Anything interesting on it?' I asked, heading to his desk with the coffee.

'Here, take a look.' He passed over the typewritten list of names and dates and I scanned down it, immediately seeing what had caught his attention.

'Well, well, well. So, Craig McBride was there.'

Twice. And for a total of nearly eighteen montl

Leppel remembers him well. Says he was a right nasty piece of work, but definitely not a drug addict. Apparently some of his colleagues used to take the piss out of him because for all his so-called hardness he was petrified of needles.'

'I knew there was nothing natural about his death. But that arsehole Burley's saying it was a self-administered overdose.'

'Capper told me this morning that all they're charging Jean Tanner with is possession of a Class A drug.'

I sighed. I can't see why they don't at least charge her with the illegal disposal of a dead body. At this rate, we'll be lucky if she ends up with a fine.'

'Maybe we should try and talk to her.'

j j

..itiybe.' I sipped my coffee, wishing there was something I could lean on her with. But what did I have that Neil Vamen didn't? There was no way I could put pressure on her and she'd know it. But in spite of everything, I'm an optimist, and that means I don't give up. I was just going to have to think of a way.

'Anyway, good work, Dave. You've done well.'

Berrin shrugged. 'I'm not entirely useless, Sarge. I can do more than just routine enquiries, you know.'

I nodded. 'Yeah, I do know. I'll do a better job of keeping you in the loop in future.' He nodded, acknowledging the fact that I was indirectly apologizing, and I hoped we could leave it at that.

I picked up the phone and tried Malik's number. Amazingly enough, he actually answered, though he informed me he was in a hurry.

This Kry's Holtz thing's turning into a nightmare/ he explained.

How come?'

'Well, no-one's co-operating, as usual. The family * say they don't know what we're talking about and apparently Kry's is fine, just not around at the moment, and now suddenly all the staff at the brothel are retracting their statements. Plus, we've got no intelligence on the ground as to who might be behind it.'

I'm sorry to bother you, Asif, but did you find out anything about this company, Dagmar Holdings?'

'I haven't had time. I'll get something sorted for you by tomorrow, I promise. Have you tried Companies House for any information?'

Tes, I have. The company exists all right. They sent me pages of stuff but nothing that really tells me very much.'

Till see what I can come up with. Can you give me your mobile number again?'

I reeled it out and Malik said his goodbyes, saying he had to go.

I flicked off the phone and stared at the pile accounts for Dagmar Holdings Ltd in my in-tray, really needed to give them a closer look. I looked my watch. Ten to twelve. It could wait until later.

'Do you fancy a drink and a bite to eat?' I ask < Benin.

He nodded and grinned. 'I could do with both.' |

Then let's get out of here,' I said, and we got our feet, once again leaving the Matthews incident room empty and silent.

lugger Lewis cooked supper that night. Thai fish curry with noodles and stir-fried veg. Very nice. Apparently he'd been working as a trainee chef for the previous six months, and whatever they'd been teaching him seemed to have done the trick because it was one of the best meals I've had in years. It gr.vo me renewed faith in the British education system, to tell you the truth. The only thing spoiling it was Johnny, who'd been moaning pretty much non-stop ever since he'd discovered who the owner of the 'Elvis barnet' was. As I finished my last mouthful, he was just starting up again, like a stuck CD.

'I've got to earn some more out of all this/ he told tiť- iCbt of us as we sat round the kitchen table. 'That's Kry's bark-at-the-fucking-moon Holtz we've got down there, known affectionately as the Barnsbury Torturer, and that's by his mum. The one geezer in the whole of north London you don't want to get on the wrong side of, and I'm part of the team that's kidnapped him. It's all right for you lot. You're all making a decent wedge out of this. I've got to make do with fuck all.'

That's because you haven't had to do fuck all, Johnny/ I told him. 'All you did was drive the car. We had the hard work.'

'I've had to put my Niagaras on the line, Max, just like everyone else, even though no-one asked me if I wanted to. And I've got to live round this fucking city for the rest of my life, permanently wondering if I'm going to end up making a oneway visit to Kry's workshop.'

'No-one's going to find you out,' said Joe, taking another mouthful.

'I nicked the cars, remember? The coppers could get some sort of lead that puts them on to me and then I'm fucked. I might get nicked for something I didn't even want a part in, and then it'll get back to the Holtzes, which is far worse.'

Tou worry too much,' I told him. Take the money you're going to get, be pleased with it, and leave it at that. You never know, tomorrow might be your last day on earth. Don't spend it crapping your pants about something that'll probably never happen.'

'It's easy for you to say. You'll have enough so you can fuck off wherever you want.'

'Ah, stop being so fucking gutless.'

It was Kalinski who spoke, his tone contemptuous. He was wearing a black polo-neck sweater with three thick gold chains over it, and his greying hair was slicked back. It made him look like a gangsta version of the Milk Tray man. He'd pushed his plate to one side, having eaten less than half the food he'd been given, and was puffing on a Rothmans.

*You think you know fear?' he said, pointing his cigarette at Johnny. 'Eh?' Johnny didn't say anything. He looked like he was an expert in it. 'You don't know shit. I'll tell you that now. Fear's when you're standing on the street with no fucking cover and the Filth, them bastards from SO19, are taking! potshots at you with sighted rifles, and your best! mate, the one you did the job with, is lying dead on 1 the pavement in a pool of blood, inches from your!

feet, and you know that in two, maybe three fucking seconds you're going to go exactly the same way.'

Kalinski stared Johnny down. That, boy, is fear.'

'What happened?' asked Johnny, eyes wide.

Tou mean, why am I still here? I took a bullet in the gut and one in the leg. I was in hospital for six weeks and the cunts still charged me afterwards. I got fourteen years for armed robbery and ,-,!' omitted murder, because I managed to hit one of their fucking blokes as well. My only regret about the whole thing was that I didn't kill the bastard.'

To be honest with you, I wouldn't get too carried away about Kalinski's role in the gunfight at the OK Corral. From what I'd heard, he'd only ever fi'-pr) one shot in anger during his long criminal i.i^eer, and that had been into a sub post office ceiling. And he wasn't exactly Papillon either. According to what Joe had told me, he'd only ever done a couple of short stretches inside, which was another of the reasons we'd hired him. It showed he was careful. Something smelled a little fishy, and it wasn't just Tugger's curry.

Johnny sighed and put his head in his hands. What am I fucking doing here?' he said to no-one in particular.

'Being gutless,' snarled Kalinski.

'Give him a break, Mike/ I said. The poor sod's had a bad week. His missus is bisexual.'

'What the fuck's wrong with that?' said Tugger. 'Nothing better than a bit of three-in-a-bed experimentation.'

'Not if the third one doesn't want fuck all to do with you.'

Tugger patted him on the back sympathetically.
'Shit, Johnny, is that right? Does her lover not swing to the beat of the phallic drum?'

'Look, fuck off, will you?' said Johnny, brushing off lugger's hand. He turned and gave me the evil eye. That was private what I was telling you, Max.'

'I had a session with a couple of lesbians once,' said Kalinski. Torn stars they were, American. Candy and Brandie they was called. Brandie's been in loads of stuff.' He shook his head in awe. They knew what they was fucking doing, I can tell you. Could have sucked ballast through a straw, both of them. Did it in a penthouse in the Savoy.'

If Kalinski had been Pinocchio, he'd have had my fucking eye. out. This bloke could bullshit for England.

I got up from the table. 'I'd better give Krysy boy something to eat.'

Kalinski glared at me. 'Fuck that, let him starve.'

'I tried him this morning/ said Joe, 'and he told me to fuck off. So I did. We're releasing him Sunday morning. If he wants to lose weight in the meantime, let him. He's had some water so he won't die.'

'He's been here nearly two days and he hasn't touched a thing. I'll just check on him.'

'You just want a chance to give him another kicking/ said Joe, with something close to a smile.

Which was partly true, I did. Krysy, like Johnny, had been a pain in the arse from the start. When we'd dragged him out of the van and into the farmhouse on the first night, he'd gone absolutely apeshit, kicking like a donkey and screaming all

sorts of uncalled-for insults. Me and Kalinski had

been forced to give him the beating of his life, just rewards for past wrongs, Kalinski taking particular pleasure in stamping repeatedly on his bollocks until Joe pulled us both off, fearful we'd kill him. When I'd tried to feed him the following morning, he'd spat in my face and told me I was a dead man, which had been a pretty fucking stupid move on his part and had cost him a broken nose, but he still routed any effort at co-operation and in those increasingly rare moments when his gag was removed he was full of bluster and threats. In the end, I had no choice but to award him a grudging respect. He was a champion arsehole and about as pleasant as a skidmark, but he was no coward. It m^Hp me think, too, that this was a much better wu/ or" dealing with him than shooting him outright. This way we broke him down, humiliated him, but we didn't kill him in cold blood. I'm not a bad lad, to be honest with you, and I don't think I'm capable of just executing someone outright without them having a chance to fight back. Plus, this way we made money out of it, so it seemed to me to be a pretty decent sort of revenge all round, really.

'At the moment, Joe, he's the most valuable thing we've got and it's in all our interests to keep him that way. At least if we give him back alive, one day the Holtzes'll forget about what happened. If he turns up dead, we'll have them on our backs for ever.' I picked up a couple of pieces of bread from the kitchen top. 'Look, I'm not exactly giving him the lavish stuff.'

I went out of the room, through the hallway, and

over to the door under the stairs that led down to the cellar. I unlocked it, switched on the light, and walked slowly down the wooden steps.

Krys was strapped to a chair which was in turn secured to the bare brick wall. He was wearing a shirt and piss-stained trousers with nothing on his feet. He had a black blindfold round his eyes and masking tape securing his mouth, and his face was covered in bruises. Dried blood had formed a crusty trail running from his nostrils, where I'd delivered the nose-breaking blow, down to his neck. Another badly healed cut wound its way across his forehead. Basically, he looked a mess.

His head turned as he heard my approach. I stopped and picked up a jug of water, filled a dirty cup, then leant over and pulled the masking tape away from his mouth. Usually this was the cue for a burst of swearing, but instead he just coughed and cleared his throat. 'I think some of my ribs are broken,' he said quietly, 'and I need to change these trousers.'

'If you're looking for sympathy, you've come to the wrong place,' I told him. 'Now, open your mouth, I'm going to feed you some bread.'

Krys did as he was told and I ripped off bite sized pieces and placed them in his mouth. He chewed hungrily and finished off both slices quickly. 'Have you got any more?'

'That's your lot. Now, I'm going to give you some water.' I put the cup to his mouth and held it there. He gulped it down, drinking about half of it before turning his head away.

I put the cup back down by the jug and thought

that I could almost feel sorry for Krys Holtz, tied up and stewing in his own urine. But then I thought of what he'd done to Elaine, and to Kalinski's brother, and that soon put a stop to it. What he was going through now was certainly no less than he deserved, and far more temporary.

'I've got money,' said Krys. 'Plenty of it. If you help me get out of here, I'll make it more than nTth your while. How much do you want?'

'Sorry, Krys, no can do.'

'A hundred grand, hundred and fifty. I could get that for you. Honest.' His voice had suddenly taken on a whining quality which didn't improve my opinion of him.

We're going to be picking up a lot more off your v,U man tomorrow.'

'He'll kill you, you know.' This time his voice was quiet, but there was an edge to it. He believed what he was saying. 'It doesn't matter where you hide. He'll find you and he'll kill you.' I started to replace the masking tape and Krys's tone immediately changed. 'Please change these trousers. Please.'

I ignored his request and finished what I was doing. Krys struggled violently in the seat for a few moments until his strength deserted him. 'In the morning,' I told him. 'We'll change them in the morning.'

Then, wondering if I really was being too sadistic, I turned and walked back up the steps, switching off the light when I reached the top.

Yesterday

Iversson

I got the call at 6.26 p.m. 'He's here/ growled Kalinski into the phone. 'Just pulled in now. Driving a matt-black Merc.'

'Does it look like he's alone?'

'I can't see anyone else.'

'No-one's pulled in behind him or anything?'

'No-one. He's definitely on his own.'

'All right. I'll talk to you shortly.'

I rang off and pulled the cap down over my head. It was raining hard again, and you had to think the gods were smiling on us as far as the weather was concerned. Usually there were plenty of walkers in Epping Forest, the only serious stretch of woodland this close to London, but tonight I had the feeling that most would be staying away. Tugger and I had taken up position at the edge of the treeline looking down across a slightly inclined grass clearing about a hundred yards long and fifty wide. It led down to more woodland from which Stefan Holtz would emerge, once we guided him to the spot. There was

no-one else in the vicinity that we'd seen, and I was confident the transaction could be made without fuss.

Tugger sat on a thick branch, his feet resting on a log, an M-16 in his hands. Purely precautionary, but always worth keeping, just in case. 'Trie's there, then?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, he's there.' I pressed the button to dial Holtz's mobile and waited while it rang.

He answered with an angry grunt.

'Mr Holtz, I'm glad you made it.'

'Where's my son?'

'He's safe and he's well.'

'How do I know that?'

'Listen to this.'

The flicked on the short tape we'd got Krys to make iit.u morning in exchange for changing his trousers and allowing him to use the toilet in privacy. It was short and to the point: he gave the date and the time, and said that he was OK and was being treated well. He hadn't wanted to add this last bit but I'd suggested that he ought to unless he wanted Kalinski to stamp on his bollocks again. Krys might have been no coward but he was no fool either, and had done what he'd been told.

I switched off the tape. 'Satisfied?'

'He'd fucking better be all right.'

'Don't threaten me, Mr Holtz/ I told him coldly.

'You really haven't got much of a bargaining position. Now, have you got the money?' Holtz grunted that he had. 'Good. Now, when we finish this conversation, drive out of the car park and turn right, crossing the M25.' I then gave him a short set of further instructions, about where he should turn

off the main road and how he should proceed from there. 'When you get to the sign that says "No Tipping", stop and park up the car on the bank. That whole journey should take you fifteen minutes. I'll call you then. Let me tell you something else as well, something very important. Do * not bring anyone else with you. When you park the car, you're going to be watched. If anyone else is with you, the whole thing's off, and that'll be the last you hear from your boy.'

Holtz started shouting something but I rang off. I wasn't prepared to listen to threats. J|

'Christ, Max,' said Tugger with a laugh. 'You were almost scaring me then. You'd make a great film villain, I tell you.'

'Alan Rickman's got nothing on me, mate. Anyway, you've got to be harsh, haven't you? I don't want him thinking he's dealing with amateurs.'

I called Kalinski back and told him to be at the rendezvous point at 6.45 sharp, then phoned down to Joe. 'I've made contact,' I told him. 'Tie's driving a black Merc and he'll be with you in fifteen minutes.'

'No problem/' said Joe. 'If there's anyone else with him, I'll let you know. Otherwise I'll follow him up, then peel off when it's sorted, and meet you at the rendezvous.'

The call ended. Everyone knew what they were doing. Now it was simply a matter of waiting.

'It's a long time since I've used one of these,' said Tugger, stroking the rifle like it was some sort of cuddly toy. It was one Joe had brought back from the Gulf War in '91. 'I think Bosnia was probably

the last time, and, Christ, that was years back. A good weapon, though. I can see why the Yanks like

it.'

'I think I prefer the AK if I was to be given the choice. Less prone to jamming.'

'You know, Max/ he said, loading and unloading the rifle's magazine, 'I do like cheffing, and I reckon I could make a lot of money out of it, especially if I run afford to open up my own place.'

'You make a mean Thai fish curry, I'll give you that.'

'Aye, I know, but...' He thought about it for a minute, at the same time putting the stock to his shoulder and aiming at an imaginary target among fhp frees. 'But it can never give you quite the same ooii of buzz as a job of violence does. You know what I mean? You don't get that sort of excitement out in the normal world.'

'Yeah,' I said, remembering the mad adrenalin rush I'd had when I'd been standing in the stairwell of Heavenly Girls, ripping holes out of Fitz and Big Mick. 'Maybe you don't.'

At 6.44 my mobile rang. It was Joe, and he was whispering. 'He's here. Looks like he's alone.'

Thanks.' I rang off, then dialled Holtz's number. It was answered immediately. 'Stand facing the "No Tipping" sign, five feet away from it.'

'How do I know what's five feet?' he demanded angrily.

'Just do it. Now turn ninety degrees to the left and start walking, keeping in a straight line. You'll see the outlines of a path in front of you. Follow it.'

Where's my son?'

'I told you, he's safe and he's well. Are you on the path?'

'Teah, I'm on the path. When am I going to see my boy?'

'If the money's all there, you'll see him first thing tomorrow morning. He'll be dropped off somewhere in London, reasonably close to a telephone box.'

'He fucking better be.'

'Keep walking and stop speaking.'

From his vantage point in the undergrowth, Joe watched as Stefan Holtz turned away and began walking up the wooded incline in the direction of Max and Tugger. Holtz had a mobile to his ear and a large holdall slung over his shoulder. Within a minute he'd disappeared from view, and the forest was silent once again, except for the steady J| crackle of rain hitting the trees, and the distant hum of traffic. No-one else had turned up to follow him and the car he'd been driving, the Merc, was empty.

He kept listening for a few moments, then, satisfied that Holtz had come alone, he slipped slowly and carefully out of his hiding place, crossed the track from which the Merc had appeared, and started up the path after Holtz, keeping as far back as possible.

Too late, he heard the noise behind him. The rustle of bushes, the sound of heavy footfalls on muddy ground, and then the terminal, gut-wrenching sensation of the hard metal gun barrel being pushed into the back of his head.

I saw Holtz emerge from the trees at the bottom of the slope, carrying the holdall. He was about a hundred and fifty yards away. 'All right, keep

walking/ I told him, and switched off the mobile.

I turned to Tugger. 'Here he comes.' Tugger nodded, and we both pulled on balaclavas. I checked the Clock, gave Holtz another thirty seconds to get nearer, then pushed my way out of the bushes. Fifty yards now separated us.

Holtz saw me but didn't quicken his pace, and we closed in on each other as casually as a couple of , < .irly-evening strollers. When we were ten feet apart, we both stopped. Holtz looked pissed off. The rain, which was pouring down now, had flattened his iron-grey hair and it was running freely down his grizzled, lined face and onto his khaki raincoat. I'd never seen a picture of him before (Holtz senior, like all his close cohorts, was v *.;i y camera shy), but thought that he looked a lot like Karl Maiden, the veteran actor from seventies cop show The Streets of San Francisco, even down to the bulbous round nose.

You've made a big fucking mistake doing this to me/ he growled, making no effort to hand over the holdall.

'And you made a big fucking mistake trying to kill me/ I said, unable to resist letting him know who'd done this to him, even though it effectively meant exiling myself for life. Sometimes you just had to show that you hadn't been intimidated.

'I don't even know who the fuck you are behind that poxy mask, so what makes you think I've been trying to have you killed? I'll tell you something, though, you cunt. If I want someone dead, that's how they end up. Dead. No fucker ever escapes from me.'

I thought about lifting my balaclava, but that really would have been stupid. But then it struck me that maybe he didn't know who I was. Maybe I was that insignificant. "That holdall looks very heavy/ I told him. 'Why don't I take it off your hands?'

Holtz managed the beginnings of a smile for the first time. It wasn't a pleasant sight. 'No, mate, it ain't as easy as that. Before you get this cash, I want to see my son. So, get on the phone to whichever cunt's holding him and get him to drive him down here. Now. Then we'll see if it's worth a trade.'

'I don't want to have to take that bag off you by force, Mr Holtz, but, believe me, I will.'

'No you won't, son,' said Holtz, shaking his head. 'No, you fucking won't.'

Tugger had the rifle to his shoulder, the barrel pointing through a gap in a large evergreen bush towards Stefan Holtz. He could see him and Max talking, but Max was making no move to take the holdall. They used to say that Tugger Lewis had a nose for danger, could sense when something bad was going to happen. One time, years back in County Down, five of them had been patrolling in a Land Rover down remote country back roads when they'd seen a car parked in a layby up ahead. Afterwards, he'd said it was just something about the angle it was parked in, slightly skewed with the bonnet pointed towards the road, like someone had abandoned it too quickly, that had caught his attention. But it wasn't that. He'd just felt it, known that something was going to happen. He'd told the driver to stop and turn round even though he'd only been a private and the driver was a

lance corporal, and the road had been so narrow that any turn was going to require some serious maneuvering, but something in his tone - the desperation, the surefire knowledge that they were driving straight towards their doom - convinced the driver to do what he said. Ten seconds later, while they were still turning round, the IRA man with the remote control, seeing that his targets were escaping, detonated the bomb in the car's boot. Two of the men in the jeep had been slightly injured, but no one was complaining. If they'd been driving past it, the impact of the blast would have killed them all.

He had the same feeling now. It had started slowly, about an hour before, but had accelerated markedly when Stefan Holtz had appeared out of the woods below. Something was wrong. There was no escaping the j..l.. Something was definitely wrong. Max and Holtz were still talking, and Tugger thought he saw Holtz smile, but he might have been imagining things. Was this a set-up? His jaw tightened and his finger stroked the trigger. He was listening now, listening for any sound that was remotely out of place.

The faint rustle of leaves being trampled underfoot, could he hear that? Off to his left, not far away, coming from somewhere in the trees. He listened harder, couldn't tell for sure, thinking, concentrating ...

Then he swung round ninety degrees, still holding the rifle at shoulder height, and saw the figure creeping through the undergrowth, twenty-five feet away, gun in hand.

Reflexively, he pulled the trigger, firing off five shots in rapid succession, the angry bark of the weapon echoing through the undergrowth. Then he hit the deck as bullets came flying back in the opposite direction.

The loud crackle of gunfire startled us both. I clocked the first shots as coming from the M-16, which had to be lugger's, and then further shots from at least two other weapons. Holtz might have thought he had some cards up his sleeve but he obviously hadn't expected anyone to start shooting. His eyes widened and he swung round to me with a look of suspicion mixed with panic. 'What the fuck's going on?'

These were the last words Stefan Holtz ever spoke. Before I could even open my mouth to answer, his left eye seemed to burst out of his face, and he fell forward, still clutching the holdall. I dived to the ground and pulled out my gun. Suddenly, shooting seemed to be coming from everywhere. I could see a figure armed with a rifle, kneeling down on the other side of the clearing about thirty yards away, partially concealed by the foliage. I knew straight away that he was the one who'd gunned down the gang leader. The shooter fired again, and blood sprayed up from one of Holtz's thighs as the round struck. I scrambled down behind his body, then, using it as cover, leant over and clattered off five rounds from the Clock in the shooter's direction, knowing that my chances of hitting him were slim but wanting to put him under pressure. He fired two shots back, both whizzing close by, then slipped back into the trees.

But now shooting was coming from behind me, and coming close, too. Clumps of mud flew up from the ground only feet from where I was lying. I whirled round and fired three shots in the general

direction of their source, unable to see my assailant; then, knowing that I was a sitting duck as long as I stayed where I was, I jumped up and pulled the holdall from Holtz's dead fingers. I hauled it over my shoulders, surprised at the heavy weight, then started running for the nearest trees, keeping as low as possible. From behind me I heard the rifleman who'd taken out Holtz cracking off shots at my rposed back, and in front of me I could make out the second shooter behind some bushes. He had what looked like a shotgun balanced over a branch and he was steadying himself to fire. I didn't give him a chance. As I charged towards him, I lifted the Clock and pulled the trigger, bang bang bang. It was a battle of nerves and he lost it, jumping out of tuv. way and dropping the weapon.

I zigzagged wildly, teeth clenched in anticipation of a striking bullet, and at the last second half dived, half-slid into the treeline and out of sight of the shooter behind me. The second gunman, only partly visible through the undergrowth, swung his shotgun round in my direction, pulling the trigger at the same time. The weapon kicked and he took a stumbling step back, the shot passing way over my head. I fired twice in return and at least one of the rounds hit him. I heard him yelp in shock and drop to one knee; then, without even pausing for breath, I jumped up with the holdall and ran in a crouch in the direction of the spot where I'd left Tugger, keeping within the trees. The branches and bushes battered and scratched me as I charged through them, every sense and nerve-ending homed in on my surroundings, knowing we'd been set up and

that there were bound to be more of them about. As if to confirm it, an unseen round whistled by a few feet above my head, letting out an angry crack as it struck a thick branch and ricocheted off into the gloom. I couldn't see the shooter and doubted that the shooter could see me.

Without warning, a figure appeared out of the trees in front of me, no more than ten feet away, running and stumbling in my direction. He had a gun in one hand and was holding an injured leg with the other. I didn't recognize him, and that meant he was the enemy. He didn't even see me until the last second, which was a fatal mistake. Without dropping my pace, I raised my weapon, stretched out my arm so the barrel was no more than three feet from its target, and shot him straight through his open mouth. He died with an expression of confused shock on his face and I was already five yards beyond him by the time the body hit the ground. A staccato burst of automatic weapon fire rattled through the trees somewhere off to my right, but it sounded like there was more hope in it than judgement, and I kept running, undeterred, hoping that Tugger was OK and had followed the instructions should things go wrong, which were to head straight back to the place where Kalinski was picking us up from. The last thing I needed now was for him to hold his ground and take a potshot at me as I came over the brow of the hill. Unlike the rest of these blokes, he'd always been a good shot. But Tugger wasn't there when I passed the spot, and there was no sign of blood or anything else to

suggest that he'd taken an injury. So I kept going, charging through the trees down the other side of the hill, feeling that terrible exhilaration danger always brings, even though it was tempered by another, far more worrying thought. What the fuck had happened to Joe?

The back of the van was open and the engine running when I came out of the trees and onto the road. I threw the holdall inside and jumped in after it. Tugger was already inside, but there was no sign of Joe.

'What the fuck happened, Max?' he demanded, still clutching the M-16. What the fuck went wrong?'

'I don't know/ I panted between breaths, finding it difficult to think. 'Somehow Holtz fucked us up, uui Christ knows how. We had everything planned down to a tee.'

'Do you think they got Joe?'

'I don't know.'

There were a lot of them. They could easily have taken him out.'

I leant out the back door and looked up towards the trees. Nothing moved up there. I punched Joe's number into the mobile. It rang. Five times, six, seven. No answer. I kept staring at the trees. No sign. No answer. Eight rings, nine. He would have picked up by now if he was all right. The longer we stayed there the more dangerous our predicament became.

'We've got to move, Max. They could be on us any minute. And the Old Bill could have been called by now. That was some fucking gun battle in there.'

Ten rings, eleven, twelve. Still nothing. Tugger

was right, I knew he was. But to leave, to desert my mate. It was a big call to make. We'd agreed to meet back at the farmhouse if it became impossible for any one of us to make the rendezvous, but still I was reluctant to make the decision to move.

Thirteen, fourteen.

'Come on, Max, we're soldiers. We can't stop everything because one man's missing, you know that. We're endangering the whole operation by staying here. Come on! Think about it!'

'What the fuck's going on in the back there?' came Kalinski's muffled but frantic voice. 'Let's get out of here!'

Fifteen, sixteen. I cursed, then closed up the back doors, knowing I had no choice. I leant over and banged the panel twice. 'All right, go!'

Kalinski hit the accelerator like he had lead boots 9 on and we were on our way in a screech of tyres.

As we drove, I holstered my gun, wiped sweat from my brow and, with a deep breath, opened the holdall, wondering exactly what was going to be in there.

It was full. Crammed full with tightly packed bundles of used fifty-pound notes. So Holtz had been genuine. Which begged a major fucking question.

Why had they started shooting?

Gallan

I had a takeaway curry that night. Chicken tikka masala, pilau rice, two poppadoms and an accompaniment of sag aloo. I knew I wouldn't

finish it all, that's a lot of food, but I thought I'd at least give it a try. What I couldn't eat, I'd have cold tomorrow. I'd also purchased a four-pack of Fosters and rented a video. It might have been a Saturday night and I might have been on my own but I was determined to enjoy myself. The lounge was comfortable, the telly - a twenty-eight-inch Sorry widescreen bought on hire purchase - was on, and all the worries of the world had been relegated to beyond my front door.

I was sitting on the sofa in my dressing gown, warming up for the video by watching a Denis Nordern pastiche of out-takes and bloopers on ITV, and was just about to tuck into the food when my mobile rang. It was ten to nine. I thought about Laving it. I was hungry and I was sure it could wait, but habit got the better of me. I've always been the curious type. I put down my food, went over to the kitchen top, and picked it up.

'John? Asif Malik here.' He sounded breathless, and the line wasn't too good.

I walked out of the kitchen with the phone to my ear and back into the lounge. 'Asif, how are you?'

'Not good. I suppose you haven't heard the news, then?'

'What?'

'Stefan Holtz. He's been shot, up in Epping Forest. That's where I am now. It looks like whoever kidnapped Krys got Stefan out of that fortified house of his, lured him here, and blew him away.'

I was shocked but not sorry. 'So, it looks h'ke some sort of takeover, then?'

The don't know,' said Malik. That's what we think,

but there's absolutely no intelligence coming from any quarter that gives us a suggestion as to who's behind it.'

'Will his death make your job any easier?'

Malik managed a humourless laugh. 'I doubt it. Now they'll all be fighting over the scraps. It means we've probably got to end up watching ten big villains instead of one. It never gets easier, John, you know that. Now, before I forget. This Dagmar Holdings--'

'I feel bad hassling you about them when you've got so much else on.'

'Sure you do. To be frank, I don't know how much help I'm going to be. They are a company suspected of links with the Holtzes but no major associate of theirs sits on their board, so it's going to be extremely difficult to connect Dagmar to individuals, unless you can lean on the board members, see what they know.'

'But they won't be inside players?'

There are three people listed as being on the board. They'll all be known to the Holtzes, but no, as far as we're aware, they're not inside players. But they might be worth talking to. I've got their addresses if you want them.'

I went back into the kitchen and grabbed a pen and paper from one of the drawers. 'I do. Thanks.'

Malik read out the name and address of the chairman, then the managing director. When he said the name of the company secretary, I froze. 'Are you sure that's the name?'

'Definitely,' said Malik.

I took the address, thanked him, then rang off. I

looked around, then found the statement of accounts on Dagmar Holdings I'd brought home the previous night. Then I checked the surnames and first initials of the board members, listed at the bottom of the first page. Malik was dead right. How the hell had I missed that?

I looked at the address he'd given me. It might lead to nothing but I knew I was going to have to give the place a visit.

I looked at my watch again. Too late now. I'd go in the morning.

Iversson

„hichever way you want to read it, it was a setup/
I said, looking at the other three in turn.

We were standing round the kitchen table, all grim-faced, the holdall containing the money open in front of us. There was no sign of Joe. The clock on the wall above the cooker said that it was five to nine. Outside, it was raining even harder than it had been earlier.

'It had to be a set-up. How the fuck did Holtz get all those people to the drop point without some sort of inside knowledge that it was going to be where it was? There were at least three other shooters there, minimum, and probably more, because somehow they managed to take out Joe as well. So someone fucking talked.'

'Not necessarily,' said Tugger. 'They could have put a tracking device on his car, something that helped them locate it/

'No way. They were on us within minutes of Holtz arriving. If they'd been tracking the car they'd never have had a chance of getting into position in that length of time. I don't care what anyone says, they were already there. And the way Holtz was talking to me, it sounded like he knew his men were in the vicinity. He was way too cocky for a man delivering a ransom.'

Teah, but you said yourself he was shocked when the shooting started/ said Tugger. 'I mean, Christ, they shot him, didn't they?'

'But it was you who fired first.'

'There was some fucking bloke creeping up on me with a gun! What the fuck was I supposed to do? Wave to him?'

'Shit,' said Johnny, who was having difficulty keeping his eyes off the money. 'I can't fucking believe this. Do you think they popped him by accident when they were trying to shoot you?'

'Fuck knows/ I said. 'Maybe.' I turned to Kalinski. 'No-one followed him into the car park, right?' He glared at me, then shook his head firmly. 'And you drove out when he left and no-one was following him then?'

'I'm no fucking fool/ he snarled. 'I know what I'm doing. I followed him and there was no other car, and no other people with him. When he turned off the main road, he turned off on his own.'

'Well then, they were already there. There's no other explanation, is there?'

'No-one rucking talked/ said Kalinski firmly.

'Then you're going to have to explain how the shooters got there that fast. So far, you haven't.'

The don't have to explain nothing.'

'Fuck it, Max/ said Tugger in exasperation. 'It could have happened. Of course it could. It doesn't take a huge great battle plan to arrive, advance up both sides of a clearing so they're flanking their boss, and confront us. And what's the alternative? That one of us was talking to them? Who? It wasn't Joe. Christ knows what's happened to him, but it doesn't look good. It wasn't me. I'd never even heard of Stefan fucking Holtz before last week. And Kalinski here ... hardly. Holtz's people murdered his brother.' Kalinski grunted in agreement. 'And Johnny. You had to virtually pressgang him to get him involved. If someone talked, that only leaves you.'

Or your missus,' said Kalinski.

'She didn't know any of the details,' I snapped. I didn't like the way this conversation was going.

'Are you sure?' Tugger sounded suspicious.

'Of course I'm fucking sure. I never told her anything about the drop-off, where it was going to be, how we were going to do it. So leave her out of it.'

'She might have overheard you talking,' said Kalinski accusingly. 'You know what women are like. I had a bird once--'

'No way. No fucking way. You're right up the wrong tree. I was always careful to keep her out of all the planning, and that's the God's honest truth.'

'Well, that doesn't leave us with anyone, does it?' said Tugger.

I stopped and exhaled loudly. Tugger was right, of course, there wasn't really anyone who could have talked, but I still wasn't convinced. Something

had happened out there, something that hadn't been planned for either by us or Stefan Holtz, and somebody somewhere knew a lot more than they were letting on. I looked at them each in turn, trying * to keep the deep suspicion I felt off my face. They all looked back with various expressions: Kalinski glowering; Johnny nervous; Tugger calm but concerned.

'We may as well finish off the boy downstairs/ * I said Kalinski. 'He's no use to us or anyone now.' 5|

'No way,' I said. "This whole thing's been fucked up enough as it is without us adding another reason for the Holtzes or the cops to come after us. He can't recognize anyone, we've got the money, so we keep our side of the bargain. That means we stay the night here, wait to see if Joe turns up, and release Kryz and go our separate ways in the morn- j ing. Just like we originally planned.'

'Joe ain't going to turn up now,' said Kalinski.

I knew Kalinski was pretty much on the button there, but I didn't need to hear it from him. 'He may, he may not. We don't know. Anyway, we stay here. Now, let's count this fucking money. We'll divvy up each man his due and I'll look after Joe's share.'

'I don't think it should be kept for him,' said Kalinski. 'If he ain't here, he ain't here. We share it out between ourselves. That's the only way.'

1 I thought you were only in it for the revenge.'

'Well, I ain't got my fucking revenge, have I? The cunt's still alive and you're saying we should release him tomorrow. Even though he fucked your missus.'

'Watch what you're fucking saying.'

'If it was me, and he'd done that to my missus, I'd have fucking killed him.'

I took a step forward, feeling my temper boiling over. I'm a patient man, but this bastard Kalinski was pushing it big time.

Tugger put his hand out in front of me. 'All right, boys, calm down. Let's all take it easy, have a drink, and talk about it again tomorrow morning. How does that sound? We're not getting nowhere like this.'

'I think I should get a bigger share of the Russell,' said Johnny. 'You say I didn't have to do too much but, what with all this lot, things ain't never going to be the same for me again.'

I turned to him, wanting to re-establish control. 'Bullshit. You've done your bit, and you've done it well, but nothing changes with the death of Holtz. No-one knows who we are and no-one's going to be able to find us. As long as we keep calm and release Krys. I'll hold the money until tomorrow. If Joe still isn't here when we're due to leave, then we'll split his share evenly, but if he is alive, and he comes looking for it, then it's got to be remembered that it's his money, and it's each bloke's lookout if he doesn't want to give it up. Now, let's count this fucking stuff. Then we can divvy up.'

The atmosphere was tense, unpleasant. No-one felt much like talking, or even eating. Beers were cracked open, as per Tugger's suggestion, but there was no celebration even though every man in the room was significantly richer. It was all there, too, every last note. Half a million pounds in fifties, just

as Holtz had been instructed, and that settled it for me. There was no way he'd been accidentally shot by one of his men who was trying to put a hole in me. However many times I went over it in my * mind, one thing remained certain, and that was that he'd had every intention of paying up.

Before we retired for the night, I took some bread down to Krys and fed it to him without speaking. Eventually he asked me whether his old man had paid the ransom. He didn't sound angry or defiant any more, just tired and uncomfortable. He'd pissed his trousers again but didn't ask for them to be changed.

'Yeah, your dad paid,' I told him.

'Are you going to let me go?' he asked, his voice sounding strangely like a kid.

'You're going to be released tomorrow morning. Then it'll all be over.'

'Thanks,' said Krys.

I didn't say anything as I replaced the gag, thinking once again that I was glad we hadn't killed him. He deserved it, no question, but you couldn't feel too much hate for a person in his state.

As I came out of the cellar and locked it behind me, I looked at my watch. 10.50 p.m. The others had all gone upstairs. I could hear them moving around. Yawning, I picked up the holdall from the kitchen table, checked to see that no-one had tampered with it, and went up to bed, noticing for the first time that it had stopped raining.

Today

Iversson

My eyes snapped open and I listened hard for a sprond. Nothing. It was dark in the room; the alarm cio^k by the bed said 2.57. Something had woken me. I was a good sleeper, usually went straight through, couldn't remember the last time my slumber had been interrupted naturally. I could see through the gap in the door that the landing light was on, but that was how I'd left it when I'd come into the bedroom. Maybe someone had got up to go for a leak. I sat up and waited for a few moments. Still nothing. I picked up the Clock from the side of the bed and checked that it was loaded - there was a round in the chamber - then lay back down again, thinking that I was getting paranoid. No great surprise, I suppose, when you're in a house with half a million in cash and three men with less than scrupulous backgrounds.

I shut my eyes and thought of Joe. Joe Riggs, the man who'd been good to me down the years. The man I'd betrayed by sleeping with his missus,

and now the man who was almost certainly dead as a direct result of me getting him involved in a dangerous scheme when all he'd wanted to do was run a business in peace.

There was a noise downstairs. Footsteps on the bare floorboards in the hall, faint but distinctly audible. Someone was moving around down there. This time I slid out of bed, pulled on trousers and a shirt, and picked up the gun. I paused and listened again. It had stopped. I decided to investigate, just in case. The holdall was under the bed but I made the decision to leave it where it was. I'd be back in a few moments. To hinder anyone who thought they could sneak in and take it, I removed the light bulb from the main light and placed it under the pillow.

Slowly, I unlocked the door and opened it as quietly as possible, then stepped outside, straining against the silence. The other doors on the landing were all shut, and nothing moved. Flicking the safety off the gun, I crept over to the stairs. The lights at the bottom were all extinguished, just as I'd left them, but that meant nothing. Someone had definitely been creeping about down there and, whatever the reason was, I was sure there was nothing innocent about it. Could it have been Kalinski deciding to ignore his instructions and to finish off Krys? If he had, he hadn't come back up the stairs again, nobody had. Maybe he'd taken his share and left. But then I would have heard a car start, and I hadn't.

The hairs on the back of my neck pricked up, the second time they'd done that in just over a

fortnight. The first had been in the minutes before Tony Franks had started shooting, and sent us all down the rocky road to where we were now.

I took a step onto one of the stairs and it creaked loudly, interrupting the night's silence. I stood still for a moment, resisting the urge to call out the way they always do in horror films, just before they get sliced into salami by the killer. Is anyone there? If someone was, he didn't want to be discovered. Hearing nothing, I took a second step, paused, then continued down the stairs as cautiously as possible.

When I was at the bottom, I concentrated on trying to pick up any sound that might seem out of place. Breathing, the shuffling of feet ... but the dead silence remained. My eyes scanned the gloom, the darkness almost impenetrable, only thin shafts of half-light coming through the kitchen windows.

I took two rapid steps forward and switched on all the lights to the hall, then turned and started. Because I spotted it immediately.

The cellar door was half an inch ajar. I'd definitely locked it, no question, and I'd also been the last person in there. Which meant one of two things, neither very good. Either he'd escaped, or ...

I stepped forward, and pushed the door wider. It was silent, and the air smelt fetid, as it always did. Krys Holtz had been incarcerated in there for three days. He stank, no question. I put a foot on the cellar steps, took a quick look round to check there was no-one behind me, and switched on the light.

I could see Krys's feet. So he was still there. I moved down the steps, one at a time, trying to make as little noise as possible ...

And froze.

Krys lay back in his seat, still bound and gagged, still wearing the clothes I'd left him in, but very very dead. His throat had been sliced through * deeply. The head was hanging back in the seat at such a precarious angle that only the fact that it was leaning against the wall prevented it from toppling off altogether. Blood had turned the front of his shirt a deep crimson and it had run down onto the tops of his legs. The blindfold had been removed, too, and his eyes were wide and terrified. The killer, then, had given him advance warning of what he'd intended.

I moved closer to the body and touched the forehead. Still warm. The flow of blood had stopped and it was coagulating rapidly round the throat region, so it was unlikely he'd been killed in the last few minutes, but it hadn't been hours ago either.

I hurried back up the steps, switched the light off, listened for a few moments to check that no-one was waiting at the top for me, and then stepped out. I walked back into the hallway, then round to the front door. It was locked. I doubled back and checked the back door of the house, which led into the utility room. Also locked. I went back through the hallway and into the kitchen, holding the Clock tightly, and went to check on the kitchen door, the last means of entry into the house.

It was unlocked. I couldn't remember if I'd checked it earlier or not, but thought I had. I'd been security conscious these past few nights, even more so since we'd taken ownership of all that money,

but so much had happened that I couldn't recall anything for sure.

I stopped for a moment and thought about it. Who knew we were here? Who wanted Krys Holtz dead? Who would have bothered to remove his blindfold before he killed him? Only someone who had a personal reason for wanting him dead. Kalinski. It had to be Kalinski. I was going to have fr > wake the others. I turned round.

A shadow suddenly filled the doorway. I started, then brought up the gun instinctively, finger tensing on the trigger.

'What the fuck's going on?'

It was Tugger. I felt myself relaxing. 'Something vpry fucking bad/ I said, approaching him.

Tagger retreated, and I saw that he too was holding a gun by his side, though where he'd got it from I didn't have a clue. He lifted it so it was pointing in my direction. 'Hold on, stop there. What are you talking about?'

I stopped. 'I think Kalinski's snuffed Krys. I heard some movement down here; it woke me up. I came down, saw that the cellar door was open, and went to take a look.'

Tugger didn't move. 'Where were you going just now?'

'I was checking the doors to see whether they were locked.'

'And are they?'

That one isn't,' I said, motioning towards the kitchen door. 'Look, you can put the gun down now, Tugger. I'm not the one who's offed Krys.'

'You put yours down, then.'

I did. 'Look, Tug, how long have we known each other? A long time, right? I'm telling you the truth. If you don't believe me, take a look. Krys is dead and there's no way I'd want to kill him.'

He stepped over to the cellar door, and peered down, switching on the light as he did so. He watched me carefully out of the corner of his eye as he put his foot on the first step. It was funny what a lot of money did to people's personalities.

'I'm going to check on Kalinski,' I said. 'See if he's done a runner.'

At that moment, the sound of a car starting came from out front. Tugger jumped back through the cellar door. 'What the fuck?'

'Go see who it is/ I snapped. Till see if Kalinski's gone.'

Once again, he gave me a suspicious look, then turned and hurried out to the kitchen door. I ran up the stairs, wondering why Johnny hadn't surfaced by now, and tried Kalinski's door. It opened immediately and I knew he'd gone, an assumption that lasted as long as it took me to reach for the light switch and flick it on.

Kalinski lay on his back under the covers of his bed, his eyes open and staring at the beamed ceiling. The pale sheets covering him were stained with blood around the chest area, and he didn't seem to have made any attempt at a struggle. I stepped forward and pulled them back. Three deep knife wounds an inch to the right of his left nipple suggested that death had been instantaneous, the result of stab wounds to the heart. Whoever had killed him had known what he was doing. But then,

I already knew that, because he'd left two people dead with hardly a sound. My bedroom was right next door to Kalinski's, and I'd been lying no more than ten feet away from him while the knife was going in. And I hadn't heard a fucking thing. My luck was still holding, but only just. Whoever was trying to kill me - to kill us all - was getting closer and closer.

The thought I heard a shout from outside and it was at that point that I made a decision: something had gone badly wrong and I needed to get out of there with the money, and fast. I flung the sheets back over Kalinski, turned and ran back to my own room, knocking on Johnny's door as I passed but no*- bothering to wait around for an answer. The wandered whether the Holtzes had the place surrounded and who among us was the one feeding information to the other side.

I pulled on some shoes, grabbed the holdall from under the bed, and went back out onto the landing. Johnny wasn't responding. I knocked again, then opened the door. Even in the gloom, I could see that the bed was empty. What the fuck did that mean? Was Johnny the traitor? All kinds of thoughts were flying through my mind, clouding an issue that was already as murky as a peat bog. But there was no time to stand around and analyse, so I ran down the stairs and pulled open the front door.

The van we'd used for the ransom pick-up was about ten yards away in the middle of the driveway. It was in the exact spot where Kalinski had parked it earlier but the lights were on and the engine was idling. I stepped outside and looked for

lugger, but he was nowhere to be seen. The thick walls of trees on both sides of the driveway were silent and empty, but who knew what or who was behind them.

Clutching the gun in one hand and the holdall in the other, I jogged up to the driver's side of the van, keeping my head down and turning round every so often, just to check I wasn't being followed, and pulled open the door.

Johnny Hexham's body tipped out unceremoniously and I had to jump out of the way to avoid being knocked over.

'For Jesus's sake ...'

Johnny stared blankly up at me, glassy-eyed and dead, his throat, like Krys's, airtight from ear to ear. But this time the wound was fresh and bubbling, the blood still dripping down onto his shirt. Blood dribbled out of the sides of his mouth like something out of a horror film. For a moment I couldn't move, so stunned was I by the turn of events. I'd been set up, and set up beautifully, and I still didn't have a clue why, or by who. Johnny lay dead in front of me, probably murdered only a couple of minutes ago, if that, and his killer was almost certainly still in the vicinity. And where the fuck was Tugger? Had he taken out Krys and been coming after me when I'd turned round and spotted; him? But there'd been no blood on his clothes. Still, that didn't mean anything. He could have changed. Could have stood out of the way of the blood's* trajectory as it spurted from the wound. And what I had he been doing creeping around down there?

I chucked the holdall across the driver's side and!

onto the passenger seat of the van, then went to

jump in-

Which was when I saw the front tyre. A deep slash ran all the way down it. I looked at the back tyre. The same. Set up perfectly, absolutely perfectly. I'd never been in a situation like this, one where I was so alone, so utterly out-thought, facing an enemy I couldn't see, let alone identify, and who st-r-rned to know every step I'd take before I'd even taken it. At that moment in time I was the most frightened I'd ever been in my life, and the most certain that this was a situation I wasn't going to get out of alive.

I stopped for a few moments to compose myself, to ralm down so I could take stock of the situation. Bu, johnny's dead eyes continued to stare up at me like something out of some murderous, madness inducing dream and I was forced to use every ounce of self-discipline to stop myself from falling into a blind panic.

Then I heard movement over by the side of the house. Turning round, trigger finger tensed, I saw Tugger coming back round. Shoot him, my instincts screamed. Shoot the bastard now! Except he was staggering drunkenly, not seeming to focus on anything. He stumbled, then fell to his knees, eyes making contact with mine, surprise in them, blood dribbling down his chin.

Instinctively, I started to run towards him, and that was when I saw the knife sticking straight out of his back, only an inch of blade still visible, and there was something in his eyes, and his mouth was opening in a desperate effort to speak. It

looked like he was trying to warn me of something^

And then I heard footsteps coming round fj
from behind the van, and the next thing I knew
something smashed hard into my face, knocking*
me completely off balance. I felt the gun drop front ' my hand and I
fell to my knees, my vision blurring *
into watery colours. Someone was standing above Jr
me and whoever it was had what looked like a If
sharpened spade in his hand. He hit me again, this
time in the side of the head, and I felt my face ~
smack against the concrete drive. ^

I was still conscious but couldn't seem to move.
Vaguely, I heard my assailant walk over and pick
up my gun, and I knew that this was it. The end.
Strangely the blows seemed to have knocked all thi fear out of me as
well. My head ached ferociously _
and I was still having difficulty focusing, butS
slowly, I rolled over and lifted my head up, wanting
to at least take a look at the man who was about
to kill me.

'How are you feeling, Max?' asked a smiling Joe
Riggs, the shovel in his hands.

Even in my dazed state, I felt the shock surge
through me. 'Joe,' I managed to say, through split
and bloody lips, 'what the fuck are you doing?'

'Getting payback, Max. Getting payback.'

I spat blood out of my mouth and managed to si|
up. I still couldn't believe that it was Joe who'dl
killed Kryz and the others. 'Why? What for? I
thought you were dead. I kept your share. I wasj
waiting here for you.'

'I know you were,' he said. 'I was watching,
fact, I was back here before you were.'

My whole world seemed like it was as blurred as my vision. 'Why?' I managed to ask again.

Joe stared down at me grimly. There was no humanity in his eyes, just a quiet intensity. I'd already come round to the fact that I was going to die but couldn't work out whether the bang on the head was causing me to see things or whether it really was true that my friend and business partner \\\-?.ř going to be the one doing the killing. 'Why these blokes? Because it's business. They mean nothing to me. Not your friend, Hexham, who's a fucking coward, not Kalinski, not even Tugger Lewis. He was an OK bloke but nothing special, and I remember once he fucked me over in a game of cards. Cheated, and took money off me that vv^ii't his. I don't forget things like that.' 'But why me, Joe? What did I ever do to you?' 'You killed my wife, Max. You killed my wife.' 'What the fuck are you--?' I never finished the question. I saw Joe raising the spade, the metal gleaming in the moonlight, and threw up my arms to protect my face as it came crashing down on my elbows, blade first, sending a searing pain up them. I fell backwards and lay there, curled up in a ball. 'I don't know what you're talking about, Joe/ I said, my voice muffled by the fact that my arms were still pressed close to my face. 'Honest, I don't.'

'Modern technology, Max. That's your problem. You remember Dietrich Fenzer, the guy who got convicted? Well, he committed suicide six months ago, still protesting his innocence. Said he definitely saw and argued with Elsa that night but that he never killed her. Three weeks ago, I got a call from

the German authorities, saying that they were reopening the case. Apparently they'd started to get their own doubts about it, and they looked again at DNA samples taken from Elsa's body at the time, and after further investigation it turned out that they didn't come from Fenzer at all.' He stopped and struck me hard across the back, making me cry out in pain. Too late for him, but it got me thinking back. Because you see, at the time, I knew she was having affairs with other men. It upset me, but I could tolerate it because I really fucking loved her. But I remember things she said, things that made me think that maybe one of the men she was having an affair with was you.'

'Joe, I swear--'

The spade came down again, this time on my fingers. I heard several of them break but didn't move them, knowing that to do so would invite a further blow to my exposed head. I clenched my teeth hard against the excruciating pain.

'I always tried to push those thoughts out of my head because you were Max Iversson, my good mate, my fucking drinking buddy.'

'I was. I am.'

'Like fuck you are!' he snarled, smacking me again on the broken fingers. I wailed with the pain, my eyes watering. I wondered how much more of this I could stand. 'But then the copper who phoned me said they were looking again at the soldiers on the base at the time because they believed that several of them had been having affairs with her, and I got to thinking about how you'd been after the murder, and how jittery you were, and that

maybe, just maybe, if they hadn't arrested Fenzer so quick I would have probably ended up suspecting you, even though you were my friend. And then I also thought that if you'd seen her arguing with Fenzer then maybe you could have planted the weapon you used in his house--'

'Please, Joe ... please. I didn't do it, I swear.'

I felt the edge of the spade cut deep into my thigh as Joe brought it down with all his strength. Instinctively, I grabbed at the wound with one of my battered hands, feeling the blood gurgle out, and Joe lifted the spade high above his head ready to strike. 'Why don't you just admit it, Max? Why don't you just fucking admit it? I know you--'

The gunshot cracked across the still night air and suddenly Joe's expression changed from rage to mild surprise. He stumbled, and the spade fell from his hands, clanking loudly on the concrete. A second shot rang out, and this time he fell forwards, narrowly missing me, and rolled over. Within a couple of seconds he'd stopped moving.

Slowly and painfully, I manoeuvred my body round so I could see who the shooter was. Tugger was holding the gun, a .38 by the looks of things, different to the one he'd been holding when he'd bumped into me in the hallway. He was still lying on the ground, having propped himself up on one elbow to deliver the shots, and he looked close to death. His eyes seemed glazed and the blood was still coming out of his mouth. The knife, too, remained firmly embedded in his back.

Somehow I managed to stagger to my feet, wincing as I used my broken fingers to lift myself

up. I limped over to lugger, still holding my bleeding leg, but he was fading fast.

He rolled onto his side and coughed violently. A thick load of gluey blood and phlegm emerged, winding its way slowly towards the ground. I sat down in front of him, trying to think what I could do to save his life, but knowing it was a lost cause. His eyes tried to focus on me but they couldn't. Finally, he spoke, slowly but emphatically, the effort looking like it might prove too much for him at any time.

'I don't cheat at cards,' was all he said. Then he rolled onto his back and died.

For a long time I watched him, my mind so torn up by what had happened that I found it impossible to think straight and to come to terms with events. Eventually I forced myself to my feet and staggered towards the van, knowing that I had to get that flight to Bermuda if it was the last thing I ever did.

I had difficulty turning the key to let myself into her apartment, but managed it on the third go. It was five past seven in the morning and I looked a mess, probably the worst I'd ever looked. My eyes had been blackened, my lips were split, and I had a long, deep cut across my forehead. Three fingers were broken and the wound in my thigh looked like it might be getting infected. It had been a bastard of a journey to get here, but I'd made it.

The apartment was dark. I didn't call her name, figuring that she was probably asleep. I needed sleep too, more than I'd ever needed it. I was going to have to get myself cleaned up before she saw me,

otherwise the poor woman would get the shock of her life, but it was going to have to wait.

I walked down the hall to the bedroom and slowly opened the door. It was dark in there and the curtains were drawn, but I could make out her figure under the sheets. It was the most welcoming sight I thought I'd ever seen. I put the holdall on the floor and removed my jacket and shirt, chucking them down too. When I was naked, I checked my wounds again, and saw that my thigh was still oozing blood. I was going to have to bandage it before getting in beside her.

'Max? Is that you?' Elaine sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes. 'What are you doing here? I thought you were coming back later.'

Nothing. Don't worry. I'm coming to bed in a moment/

She switched on the bedroom light and gasped. 'What the fuck's happened to you? Have you been attacked?'

I think I might have managed a grim smile. 'You could say that. Look, don't worry about it. I'm OK, I promise.'

'Christ, come here.' She stepped out of bed, dressed only in a baby doll nightie, and for a moment I felt my troubles fading. It's amazing what female flesh can do for a man. We embraced, and I kissed her on the mouth, ignoring the pain in my lips. 'It's good to have you back/ she whispered, looking up at me, her fingers stroking my inner thigh. In spite of everything that had happened, I began to get a hard on. 'Did you get the money OK?'

I smiled as her fingers drifted across to my balls, and motioned towards the holdall. 'Teah, I got the money. And I think I've earned it.'

Gallan

I yawned. It was early, far too early for a Sunday, but it was all about surprise. Confront your quarry when they least expect it. However, quarter past seven on a Sunday morning could almost be construed as harassment. I was sure a clever lawyer would see it that way, but I'd worry about that later. I didn't want to waste any time. With all the absentees on the Matthews case, it was good to get the chance to speak to someone who was still actually around.

I crossed the road and walked up to the entrance of the apartment building. An attractive middle aged lady in jogging gear was coming out. I smiled at her, and she automatically kept the door open for me to walk through. Very careless, particularly in a city like London. I could have been anyone. I didn't complain, though, since it made my job easier. Just smiled and thanked her, and she smiled back.

When I was inside, I started up the stairs.

Iversson

She pulled me towards her, kissing me hard, her tongue slithering and tumbling into my mouth like a three-legged lizard. 'We're rich, baby. Rich

beyond our wildest fucking dreams.' She laughed out loud, stroking my cock while I let loose with the old moans of pleasure, beginning to forget all my various aches and pains. Bending down in front of me, she brushed her lips across my nipple, gently nibbling it, before sinking slowly down to her knees in a way that was guaranteed to bring forth a bout of premature ejaculation. I let out a thin gasp like a hamster's squeak as she slowly swallowed me up, all the time gazing up at me with those big brown bedroom eyes.

I smiled down at her, then let my eyes drift around the room as I tried to stop myself from coming, eager to prolong things as long as possible. My battered face stared back at me from the mirror on the opposite wall, grinning stupidly. I focused on it for a moment as Elaine's tongue created sensations I could hardly stand.

And then, as I was beginning to turn away, I saw it. A wicked-looking silencer coming into view. Pointing straight towards the back of my head. I heard the creak of a floorboard behind me and knew immediately that I was one second away from death.

In one single movement I threw myself against the wall, ignoring the pain as Elaine bit me in the shock of my sudden withdrawal, and lashed out with my arm, knocking the gun flying. Its owner, a stocky bloke in a baseball cap, looked momentarily shocked. I took my chance and jumped forward, grabbing him as best I could and headbutting him on the bridge of his nose. The cut on my forehead immediately reopened but the gunman had been

hurt. He took a step backwards but quickly recovered himself, delivering a sudden flurry of rabbit punches to my kidneys as he struggled to break my grip.

Every part of my body seemed to be burning with pain, and blood from the head wound was dripping down my forehead and into my eyes. But I knew I couldn't give up. I had to protect us.

Summoning all my strength, I headbutted the gunman again and wrestled him through the bedroom door and out into the hallway, banging him hard against the opposite wall. His cap fell off, revealing a hairless head beneath, and for some reason this seemed to give him a renewed burst of strength, like Samson in reverse. He cursed and managed to push me away, before trying but failing to deliver a punch to my bollocks. I gasped as he got a better shot to my ribs, and took a step back as if hurt, before charging forward, head bowed like a bull, and delivering another ferocious headbutt right to the chin. Something cracked in there and the gunman made a sound half like a cough, half like a scream. Realizing my head was my best weapon, I shoved him back against the wall, then swung round so my back was facing him and delivered a skull-jarring reverse butt. His resistance simply evaporated and he slid down the wall, unconscious.

My head was spinning and my eyes stinging with blood, so much so that I could hardly see. Regaining my balance, I wiped at my face with my forearm, clearing the worst of the obstruction, and tried to focus again.

Which was the moment when the silencer hissed and a searing pain that eclipsed anything I'd yet felt surged through my shoulder, the force of it sending me reeling into the wall.

Gallan

I was just about to knock on the door when I heard a loud commotion from inside and the sound of shouting. I put my head against the wood and listened. It sounded like a fight between two men, and I wondered for a moment if I'd got the wrong place. One of the men howled in pain, and there was a crash as if they'd both just charged into a wall. They were big blokes, I could tell that from the force of the impact, and I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and that it was best just to call for reinforcement.

Then there was a pause in proceedings for a couple of seconds, followed by a faint popping sound, then a cry of pain and a dull thud.

I'd seen enough Hollywood films to know immediately that it was a gunshot from a silencer, and the damage it had done was obvious, even if I couldn't see it. I stepped back from the door and dialled the station on my mobile. The controller answered after four rings. I gave my location and called for backup.

The need firearms units as well as an ambulance,' I hissed into the phone. 'Someone in there is definitely armed, and it's the address of a person we need to question with reference to a murder,

although I must emphasize that at the moment the person is not, I repeat not, a suspect.'

I switched off the mobile and went back to the door and listened. There were voices coming from inside, one sounding in pain, the other dominant, firm. Ruthless. I knew I should wait for reinforcements. All my training told me there was no point confronting armed suspects in an enclosed space when unarmed, particularly when it was obvious that the suspect had just shot someone. All my instincts agreed. It was a united stand. But at the same time I also knew I couldn't stand there and do nothing while someone was murdered, and from the tone of the conversation in there it sounded like that was exactly what was about to happen. Sometimes, like it or not, you simply have to stick your neck out. The alternative is the eternal knowledge that you could have done something to save a life but chose not to.

I pulled a credit card out of my pocket and, using the method a convicted burglar had once taught me, went to unlock the door.

Iversson

I was sitting back against the wall, shaking as my body went into shock. To my left lay the unconscious gunman. In front of me stood the woman I was in love with, half naked, very beautiful, and pointing a long-barrelled Browning at me, the end of the silencer only a few feet from my face. After everything else, it was a sight my mind really

couldn't fathom. It felt like I'd finally cracked and this was the beginning of my short and probably one-way route to the loony-bin.

'Elaine/ I managed to say through teeth that were chattering manically. 'What are you doing?'

She managed a sympathetic smile. 'I'm sorry, Max, I really am. If it's any consolation, it's just business. Nothing else. You're actually not a bad bloke, even if Joe Riggs does say you murdered his missus a few years back; you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now, I didn't want to do this - that was his job.' She motioned towards the unconscious gunman. 'In fact, it was Joe's job, but the thing is, you don't seem to want to die. And now it's left to little old me to do the dirty deed. You 'now something, Max, I've never shot anyone before, and I've never really wanted to either, particularly someone who was such a good lay, and in my fucking flat as well, but you know what they say, never let emotions stop you from doing your job.'

Still I couldn't get a grip on what was going on. I heard her words, delivered in a slightly weary matter-of-fact tone, saw her standing there pointing a gun at me, but none of it seemed to register. It seemed like maybe I'd fallen asleep, and that any second now I'd wake up in her arms with her stroking my head, telling me it was OK, it was just a bad dream, like my mum used to do when I was a kid.

'Elaine,' I whispered. 'I love you.' And I know it sounds stupid, but I really meant it.

'I know you do, darling,' she said, her finger tensing on the trigger. 'I know you do.'

The door lock clicked, and slowly, ever so slowly, I pushed it open.

Peeking my head round, I saw a naked man in the hallway about three yards away, bruised and bleeding, and apparently suffering from a bullet wound to the shoulder. He looked a mess, and he was shaking badly. Next to him lay another man in casual clothes, not moving, his head turned away. The naked man was staring into a room right in front of him, from which emerged a slender hand and forearm holding a long gun with a silencer attached, aimed at the naked man's head. I couldn't see the actual person holding the gun but I was pretty confident it was Elaine Toms, company secretary of Dagmar Holdings, who owned the flat in which I was now standing.

The naked man whispered something I couldn't quite make out but which sounded a lot like 'Elaine, I love you', and his face suggested he meant what he was saying, which was a bit unfortunate. And I thought I had problems with my love life.

I took a step forward, then another one.

'I know you do, darling/' said Elaine Toms in her slightly grating north London accent. 'I know you do/'

Her finger was tensing on the trigger, I could see it. I took another step forward, frantically calculating what I could possibly do to prevent her from killing him. The naked man's eyes were widening and his mouth was opening, though no words were

coming out. He knows, I thought. He knows he's about to die.

'Armed police!' I yelled suddenly. 'Drop your weapon and come out with your hands up. You're surrounded. I repeat, you are surrounded!' My voice was loud and authoritative, probably the most it had ever been. I hoped Elaine Toms didn't recognize it from our earlier meeting.

It seemed she didn't.

'Get back!' she called out, still not showing herself and making no effort to drop the weapon. 'Get back or I'll shoot him! Don't think I'm bullshitting either. If you don't get out of this flat now I'm going to kill him. Do you understand? And you'll be the one who's fucking responsible.'

The naked man, his face covered in blood, turned his head and looked at me quizzically, presumably wondering where my gun was.

'Drop your weapon, Miss Toms,' I demanded, desperately trying to keep the fear out of my voice. 'You are in enough trouble as it is without adding murder to your crimes. If you drop your weapon, then this will end peacefully. If you don't, then you risk being shot.'

'Retreat now or I kill him. I mean it!'

'Don't do it, Miss Toms. You are surrounded. It won't do any good.'

And then my heart sank as, still pointing the gun at the naked man's head, she stepped out of the room and into the hallway.

For a second she looked confused, then the confusion turned to annoyance. Slowly, the barrel of the gun moved round so it was facing me.

There is no feeling in the world more hopeless, more desperate, more frightening, than when you are standing looking at the end of a gun that's held steadily and calmly by someone you know is going to kill you. And impotent, too. It's an impotent feeling realizing that nothing you do or say, no pleading, no begging, nothing, is going to change the dead angle of that weapon, or prevent the bullet from leaving it and entering your body, ripping up your insides, and ending every experience, every thought, every dream you've ever had. You think about people you care about, places you've been to that you liked, and you know you're never going to see any of them again. Your guts churn, the nerves in your lower back jangle so wildly that you think you're going to soil yourself, your legs feel like they're going to go from under you like those newborn calves you sometimes see on the telly. And your eyes. You know that your eyes betray your sense of complete and utter defeat.

You are a dead man, and you know it.

And then two things happened.

First, Jack Merriweather sat up, rubbing his head and uttering the immortal words, 'What the fuck's going on?'

Second, the naked man kicked out with his right leg and struck Elaine Toms in the calf of her left one, knocking her off balance. She slipped, then fell forward, and the gun went off, the bullet ricocheting off the carpet before flying harmlessly into the ceiling. She landed on her front, gun arm outstretched, but still holding it. As she tried to right herself, I took my chance, running forward and

stamping as hard as I could on her wrist. She yelled in pain, but didn't release the gun, so I stamped again, and this time she did. I pulled it up by the barrel, stepped back, resisting the urge to kick her in the face for scaring me senseless, and turned the gun round. Toms massaged her wrist, wailing in pain and accusing me of breaking it, while Merriweather continued to rub at his head and face, smearing the blood over it, still unsure, it seemed, about what was happening. The naked man simply sat where he was, shivering and silent.

'All right,' I said, holding the weapon gingerly, and praying that no-one chose this moment to make a break for it, 'everyone stay where they are.'

The need a cloth for my face/ said the naked man, and slowly got to his feet. 'Please.'

He stood where he was for a moment, wiping the blood from his eyes. Something about him looked familiar. Very familiar, though the beard made it difficult to tell for sure.

In the distance, I could hear the sirens. 'Just stay where you are for a moment, sir.'

'Please, I need water.' He stumbled forward into the room from which Elaine Toms had just emerged. At the same time, she started edging along the floor in my direction, eyes watching me like a hawk in search of a weakness.

I pointed the gun directly at her head. 'Do not move,' I told her.

The man with no clothes', she said, motioning over her shoulder, 'is Max Iversson. He's wanted for murder.'

Iversson. Shit!

I heard a window opening in the other room, and the sound of someone clambering out. A second later, a noise like a crash came from outside. I stayed put, hoping he wouldn't get far without any clothes, knowing that I had to make sure Toms didn't escape. I cursed myself for not clocking Iversson immediately. It's amazing what some blood and the Grizzly Adams look'll do to a person's face.

Toms looked like she was going to make a break for it. 'You're letting him get away,' she said mockingly.

I smiled at her, holding the gun steady. "Then I'd better make sure I don't make the same mistake with you.'

She gave me a very unladylike sneer but didn't make any move. At the same time, the sirens seemed to close in from all sides, cars screeching to a halt in front of the building. There was a loud bang as the front door to the building was forced, followed by the sound of heavy footfalls on the stairs.

The cavalry had arrived.

Wednesday, three days later

Gallan

'So, Jack, tell me. Why were you in Elaine Toms's apartment armed with an illegal handgun and jilencer?'

Merriweather looked at his solicitor, who gave a slight nod, then back at me. 'No comment/ he said, scratching absentmindedly at the plaster on his broken nose.

'How do you know Elaine Toms?'

There was a pause. 'No comment.'

'Is it through Dagmar Holdings?' Again, he looked at the solicitor, a bald, pinch-faced individual with outsize glasses and an officious air. This was the infamous Melvyn Carroll. Again, he gave that little nod.

'No comment.'

'What do you know about Dagmar Holdings?'

'No comment.'

I sighed. 'You're not helping us much here, Jack.'

'Or yourself,' added Knox, who was sitting beside me. 'You're facing very serious charges.

Charges that carry a substantial prison sentence. We're talking years, Jack, not months. Years. I suggest you think about that next time you get asked a question.'

Merriweather yawned ostentatiously. 'Are you lot going to charge me with anything or are you just going to sit here wasting my time?'

Melvyn Carroll leant forward. He smelt strongly of eau de cologne. 'My client insists he has done nothing wrong, and, as he has informed you repeatedly, has nothing further to say on the matter. I would therefore strongly request that you let him

go-'

Knox and I looked at each other, then back at Merriweather. Jackie Slap stared straight ahead at me, his eyes cold. His expression was a simple one. It said: You can't touch me. I held his gaze, looking back at him expressionlessly. The room was silent for several seconds as the two of us stared each other down. Carroll opened his mouth to say something, but it was me who spoke first.

'What do you know about the murder of Robert Jones?' I asked, and something in Merriweather's expression cracked. The composure was restored within the space of a second, but it was too late. I'd caught it. I knew I was on the right track.

He shook his head slowly. 'I don't know nothing about anything like that. Never heard of the bloke.'

'You've never heard of Robert Jones, the paperboy who got murdered six months ago?'

'Oh yeah, yeah, that. I heard about it, but I don't know nothing about it. Why should I?'

That's a good question,' said Carroll. 'What has

the murder of a paperboy got to do with the charges my client is being questioned in connection with?'

We think Mr Merriweather may be able to throw some light on the child's murder/ said Knox, emphasizing the word 'child'.

'Look, don't try to fit me up with something like that!'

'No need to shout, Jack,' said Knox.

'I'm surprised you thought you hadn't heard of him/ I continued, 'because it was, and is, a very high-profile case, and the last place he was seen alive, before he was so brutally murdered, was Runmayne Avenue where an associate of yours, Tony Franks, has a house--'

'Never heard of him.'

'And where you were seen by witnesses on a number of occasions, including only two weeks ago, when you were emptying out the property and claiming you were Mr Franks's brother.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'And I don't know where this is leading/ Carroll interjected. 'I'm going to have to ask you to desist with this line of questioning. It's completely irrelevant.'

I bent down beside my chair and picked up an evidence bag. I held it in front of Merriweather's face. 'Guess what this is.'

Merriweather squinted. 'I can't see anything.'

'Look closer.' I pointed my finger at something almost intangible in the bag. 'It's a fibre, Jack, or two fibres to be precise. They came from the coat Robert Jones was wearing on the day he died, and

guess what? We found them in the house you were emptying the other week. What do you think of that, then?'

'There must be some mistake.' There was no doubting the fear on his face now. Carroll also looked wrong-footed by this unwelcome new development. 'I don't know anything about a dead kid.'

'Are you sure about that, Jack?' asked Knox.

'Course I'm fucking sure.'

'How do you explain it, then?' I asked. 'How they got there.' 4

'It's nothing to do with me. I didn't live there.'

'Why were you emptying out the place, then?' Knox said.

'Where's Tony Franks, Jack? We can't seem to find him.'

'I don't know a Tony Franks.'

'Why were you emptying out his house, then?'

'I wasn't--'

'We've got a witness who says you were. She even spoke to you.'

'Fuck this, I don't want to answer any more questions.'

'I think my client would like a break in proceedings,' said Carroll.

'We haven't finished yet,' snapped Knox.

'I've fucking finished/ said Merriweather, folding his arms and making a great play of looking

away.

'Don't you want to have a look at this photo?' I asked, taking it out of my pocket and sliding it along the table towards Merriweather. 'It's the last

one ever taken of Robert. Christmas Day lunch last year, six weeks before he died. If s a good one, isn't it?'

Merriweather continued to look away, but I could see that his jaw was quivering.

'I really must protest about these methods. My client has already said he doesn't want to answer any more questions on this matter. I am therefore requesting, in the strongest possible terms, that you terminate this interview.'

'Were you aware, Jack, that a company called Dagmar Holdings paid the rent on Tony Franks's house?'

'I've never heard of Dagmar Holdings.'

'Really?' I said, and Merriweather immediately knew he'd made a mistake. You could see it in his eyes. Two cheques from Dagmar Holdings totalling a grand total of nine thousand three hundred and twenty pounds were paid into a bank account belonging to your wife, one in February, another in June. You were also at the home of the company secretary of Dagmar Holdings when we arrested you.'

'With an unlicensed firearm/ added Knox for good measure.

'As your representative, Jack, I advise you to make no further comment at this time.'

'No comment,' said Merriweather.

'One way or another someone's going down for this child murder, Jack,' said Knox. 'We're not going to rest until we find the person responsible.'

'And for some reason, you seem to be lying a lot during the course of this interview.'

'And you're connected very strongly to the house where we believe he died.'

'Where's Tony Franks, Jack?'

'No comment.'

'Did he kill Robert Jones, or did you?'

'What did you kill him for, Jack? Did he see something he shouldn't have done?'

'No comment. I told you! No fucking comment!' He turned to the brief. 'Come on, Melvyn, tell 'em I'm not answering any more fucking questions about stuff I don't know nothing about.'

'You heard my client/ said Carroll. 'He's saying nothing further at this time.'

Knox and I looked at each other and nodded. 'OK/1 said. 'We'll return you to your cells while we continue our enquiries. Before we finish, though, there's one thing I'd also like to show you.' I picked up another evidence bag, again seemingly empty. 'It's one of Robert Jones's hairs, also found at Runmayne Avenue. Amazing what you can discover when you look hard enough, isn't it?'

'Not a very good clean-up job, was it?' said Knox with a sympathetic smile.

Merriweather tried to stare us both down, tried to appear calm and aloof in the face of our threats, but it wasn't working. A single bead of sweat ran down the middle of his forehead and onto the bridge of his broken nose. He was immediately aware of it, and knew we could see it. Knew we knew.

'Interview terminated at twelve forty-five p.m./1 said, and switched off the tape. I stood up and smiled at Merriweather. 'We'll talk again soon/ I told him.

When the two of us were safely ensconced in Knox's office, along with Benin, we discussed what we'd gathered from the interview.

'It's still tenuous, John. If he holds out, we're in trouble. He's consistently denying his involvement with the case, and the witness statements and that little bit of forensics are hardly enough to pin him for the murder. At the moment, all he's down for is possession of an illegal firearm, which he's denying. He says it belonged to Iversson. If it carries on like this, he could easily get bail. Is there no way we can get Iversson to talk and let us know what was happening there?'

Iversson had been captured after a short but dramatic chase through the streets of Clerkenwell, but he wasn't co-operating either,

I sighed. 'He's even more of a no-comment merchant than Merriweather. Iversson's linked with the massacre at the farm and the kidnapping of Krys Holtz, so I think he figures he's got nothing to gain by talking, and nothing to lose by staying silent.'

What about Toms? Can't we prise anything out of her?'

I shook my head. 'She knows a lot more than she's letting on but she's not stupid. Her story's that she was with Merriweather, whom she knows vaguely, when Iversson turned up and tried to rape her. He beat up Merriweather but somehow she managed to get his gun off him and shoot him in the shoulder. She claims it was self-defence and it's a story she's sticking by. Therefore, in the absence of Franks, who we can't find anywhere, our best

bet's got to be Merriweather. He knows what's going on, I'm sure of it, and he's got the most to lose by not cooperating.'

'But will he crack?'

'No-one wants to be labelled a child killer/1 said, 'especially a macho gangster type like him, and I don't think he's as much of a hardman as he likes to make out. Yes, in my opinion, he'll crack.'

Ten minutes later, while we were still talking, the phone on Knox's desk rang. He picked it up, listened for twenty seconds, smiled, and told the caller we'd be right down. He looked at me with the sort of expression my wife's lover would pull if he'd just stumbled on a story that would put the prime minister out of a job. 'It looks like you're right, John,' he said, and I think there might even have been some admiration in his voice. 'He wants to talk to us.'

"That's good.'

'Better than good. He wants to do it without his brief present.'

'First things first. I want immunity.'

'You haven't told us anything yet, Jack,' said Knox, lighting his cigarette for him.

'I've got stuff, all right?' he said, looking at us both in turn. 'Stuff that'll put people away, but if I help, I don't want to fucking go down. I'm going to need the works. Immunity, new identity. All that shit. Understand?'

'If what you tell us is the truth,' said Knox, 'and it's a big if, and if you're prepared to testify, then obviously special arrangements will be put in place

for you. But no decision's going to be made on that until we hear what you have to say.'

There was a long silence while Merriweather thought about what had just been said. 'You know, I've never done nothing like this before/ he said eventually. 'I'm no grass, I'll tell you that now. If it hadn't been for that fucking kid - that's when it all went wrong.'

'What happened?' I asked, unsure whether I felt excited or depressed that we were so close to the truth.

'I wasn't even there at the time, and that's a fucking promise. I had nothing to do with it. I'd never kill a kid. I mean, I've got three of my own, haven't I? I'm no fucking nonce.'

'Let's start at the beginning. Jack/ said Knox.
'What was the house being used for?'

He took a drag on his cigarette, then answered without looking at us. 'Smuggling. A lot of the smack from eastern Europe went through that gaff. It used to get dropped by the couriers at sites in Kent and then Franks and whoever else he was using would go and pick it up and bring it back to the place for storage. We always reckoned it was the perfect cover because it wasn't the sort of place you'd expect to find gear. You know, it was a nice posh area.'

'And the gear was paid for by Stefan Holtz, right?' I said. 'It was his stuff?'

'It belonged to the organization, yeah.'

'So what's this got to do with Robert Jones?'

'Well, it wasn't just smack that was being smuggled. You see, Tony Franks, me and him both

report to Neil Vamen, and there was other sidelines Neil had going that the boss, Stefan, didn't know about, because he wouldn't have approved.'

'What were they?'

'Guns, that was the main one. And not just any guns either. All sorts. Grenade launchers, AK-47s, even anti-fucking-tank missiles. You see, Tony had been a mercenary or something over there, and he got us involved with the drug-smuggling routes through Bosnia. It was his idea to do guns because we had the route set up and the place was chock-a-block with firearms. Well, Stefan never liked that idea, he didn't think we should be putting weapons in the hands of people who could use them against us, but Neil had contacts. Not just here but in Ireland, and he reckoned he could make a serious packet out of it, and there was no need to let the boss know, so that's what we did.

'It worked pretty well, too - so well that Neil began to get this idea that maybe things would be better if he ran the organization rather than Stefan. He used to say that Stefan was too traditional in the way he did business, that he didn't think big enough. A couple of years back he even got us to plant a load of rifles on Tommy Holtz to get him put away. I think Neil's idea was to start taking out the Holtzes one by one. Anyway, things were going nice, Tony's doing most of the work, I'm just checking up on him now and again, and then suddenly I get a call one morning last February from Tony saying he's got a problem. A big problem. I get round there and I can't fucking believe what I see. I still can't fucking believe it. There's this kid, this Robert

Jones, and he's laid out on the floor with his paper bag, and he's dead, and Tony's standing over him with this geezer, Shaun Matthews, who used to help him out sometimes, and they're saying what the fuck are we going to do?'

He dragged hard on the cigarette, shaking his head, reliving the scene. First things first, I ask them what the fuck's happened, and Tony says that they was unloading some boxes in the front room full of rifles they'd taken delivery of when they heard a noise round the back. Tony goes out to take a look what it is and catches this kid, who's been looking in the window at what they've been doing. Fuck knows what he was up to. Maybe he saw them taking stuff out of the van and got suspicious, and just decided to have a butcher's. It was a stupid thing to do, whatever it was.

'So Tony nabs him and drags him inside, but now they don't know what to do with him. They know they can't let him go because he's bound to tell someone, and then that someone'll tell you lot, and you'll come sniffing round asking questions, and even if they get rid of the stuff and it's their word against the kid, Stefan'll probably find out, and it'll look bad on them. As it happens, I think they just panicked a bit as well, and Matthews, he admitted it was him, took a knife to the kid and killed him. Then they're wondering what to do with the body so they call me. Can I have another fag, please?'

Knox pushed the pack over to him and we watched as he pulled one out with shaking hands, put it to his lips, and lit it. Jackie Slap Merriweather,

for all his initial bravado, was carrying a lot of guilt about with him, and had been for six months.

He exhaled loudly. 'So I tells them to get some gloves, not to touch the body unless they're wearing them, and to make it look like a nonce has done it, then get rid of the thing.'

'Did you help in that process?'

He shook his head. 'No. That kid was only a couple of years older than my oldest. I wasn't going to do nothing. It was their problem, not mine. So I left them to it, but not before I'd told them to keep their gobs shut. I didn't want Neil finding out about it.'

'So where's Tony Franks now?' asked Knox.

'Dead,' answered Merriweather.

'What happened?'

'It's a long story and, I have to tell you, it's one I can't hardly believe myself.'

'We're in no hurry, Jack. I think you may as well start talking.'

He exhaled loudly again, then began. 'Well, nothing happened for months. Obviously you lot were looking for the boy's killers but I was pretty sure we - I mean they - were in the clear because it looked like you was searching for a nonce, and I think they'd covered their tracks well enough. Then, a couple of weeks back, it all went wrong. Someone offed Shaun Matthews.'

Knox looked surprised. 'What? You don't know who?'

Merriweather shook his head. 'No. It was no-one from the organization.'

Knox and I looked at each other quizzically. This

was an interesting development, and something we'd have to pick up on later.

'Anyway, as well as doing a bit of work with Tony, Matthews also ran the door at this club called Arcadia, as you probably know. Now, Neil owns Arcadia even though his name's not on the deeds, but a bloke called Roy Fowler's the one who's actually been managing it for him. But Fowler was skimming the club, taking money that was meant for Neil, and Matthews was involved as well. So, when Matthews gets topped, Fowler panics, thinks we're on to him, which we were, and thinks we're going to kill him, which we weren't. Not as far as I knew anyway. The problem is, though, Fowler's convinced he's a dead man, so he f-akes evasive measures.'

'What sort of evasive measures?' I asked.

'Blackmail. You see, he's got something up his sleeve he's been keeping as a bargaining chip for just this sort of eventuality. In fact, he's got two things. He's got a tape recording he made of a conversation he had with Matthews, and in this conversation Matthews, who as it happens was pissed, is talking about the weapons scam and how it's run by Vamen, and also what happened with the kid. Just the sort of tape you don't want falling into the hands of Stefan Holtz. But he's got something worse as well. He's got the knife that killed the kid.'

'How the hell did he get hold of that?' demanded Knox.

'I honestly don't know. Maybe Matthews panicked when they got rid of the body, kept it for

a while, then gave it to Fowler to get rid of.' He shrugged. I couldn't tell you. But, either way, Fowler decided to hang on to it, just in case it ever proved useful, and so, when Matthews died and he suddenly thought he was next, he sent a message to Neil saying that he had this incriminating stuff and that if we tried to do anything to him he'd make sure Stefan and the Old Bill got to hear about it. He also said he wanted a hundred grand so that he could get out of the country, and if Neil gave him that, then he'd hand over the knife and the tape.

'So Neil, who's none too pleased to find out about the dead kid, arranges to meet up with Fowler to do the exchange. At the same time, he finds out from Elaine Toms, who's like his eyes and ears in Arcadia, that Fowler's going to be getting his security from Tiger Solutions. Well, Tiger's run by a bloke called Joe Riggs, who's a bit of an associate of Neil's, nothing major, but he's had some involvement in the weapons side through Tony. So we set it up that Tony would be on the team taking Fowler to the meet. He'd deal with Fowler, and anyone else who got in the way, and take back the evidence. End of story, end of problem.

'Except it didn't work out like that. Joe's been rumbling on about his partner, Iversson - the naked bloke you nicked - for a long time, and even thinks that Iversson might have offed his missus - that's Joe's missus - years back. So, when it's all set up, Joe makes sure that Iversson's one of the ones escorting Fowler, because he wants Tony to take him out as well. Only problem is, Iversson was a bit

tastier than Tony was prepared for, and Tony was the one who got shot.'

'So Iversson didn't have anything to do with the murder of Fowler?'

He looked at me. 'No. He didn't have a clue what was going on. The thing was, though, he was now a fucking complication. He knew what had happened, plus you lot were after him, so things could have got very dodgy if he'd been picked up.

'We were still thinking what to do about him when he turns up at the Arcadia and ends up in the sack with Elaine Toms, who, as it happens, is one of Neil's exes and a girl he's got a real soft spot for. They were going to have Iversson killed round her Hat, which was where he was staying after you lot started looking for him, but then Neil has a bit of an idea. A better way of dealing with him. Like I said earlier, Neil's been looking to move in on Stefan for a while, but it was never going to be easy because Stefan didn't move from that fucking house of his, and he's guarded to the hilt. Plus, Neil doesn't want to be seen to do anything that'll make him look disloyal. Far better to get someone else to do it. So he gets Elaine to push Iversson into kidnapping Krys because he knows that's the only way he's going to get Stefan out into the open. Joe helps her set everything up, Krys gets lifted, and when Stefan turns up at the rendezvous with the ransom money, he gets popped by our people. And the beauty of it is that no-one suspects Neil at all.'

'What happened at the farmhouse?' asked Knox.
'We found Riggs's body there, as well as a number of others, including Krys Holtz's.'

Merriweather sighed. 'That was Riggs's fault. He was meant to sort out Krys and Iversson and leave their bodies there so that Iversson would get the blame for everything, but that fucker's got a real knack for staying alive, and it was Riggs who got killed. When Riggs didn't show up to say that it had all been sorted, we had to take our own evasive action. We thought Iversson would head for Elaine's so I went round there, just in case she couldn't handle things, and that's where you found me. She tried to kill him, he attacked her, and I just got in the way.'

'What about Shaun Matthews?' I asked. 'Who killed him if it was no-one from your own organization?'

'Christ knows/ said Merriweather. 'Who the fuck poisons anyone anyway? It's a recipe for getting caught these days, what with all them technological advantages you lot have got.'

'Our information strongly suggests that Matthews's girlfriend of a number of months was also a mistress of Neil Vamen.'

'Who's that, then?'

'Her name's Jean Tanner.'

For the first time in the interview, Merriweather laughed, although there wasn't much humour in it. 'Oh yeah, you were on about her in the Seven Bells the other week, weren't you? Nah, I wouldn't put it quite like that. They went out for a little while - old Neil likes to have a few girlfriends - but it was all over way back.'

'When?'

He shrugged. 'I dunno, four, five months ago'

But she was a right weirdo. Used to work in Heavenly Girls, but even the punters stayed a bit clear of her. She was nice looking, and all right when you first met her, but, I dunno, it's difficult to put your finger on, but something about her wasn't quite right, know what I mean? I know old Neil was glad to get rid of her. As it happens, I think she was the first girl he'd ever been with who ictually scared him - not that he'd ever admit it, of course.'

'So, what about Craig McBride?' I asked.

'Craigy? They said he died of a smack overdose, didn't they? Not that I ever saw him take any. Always thought he was more of a coke man myself. He died round her place, didn't he?'

That's right.'

'Well, it wouldn't surprise me if she'd helped him along.'

'Why would she do that?'

'I dunno, maybe he was annoying her or something. The thing is with her, she was the sort you could imagine doing something like that, do you know what I mean? She was dodgy.'

'And it takes one to know one, eh, Jack?' said Knox.

'Whatever.'

We all sat in silence for a while while Merriweather sucked up what was left of his latest cigarette.

'So, do you think she could have killed Matthews, too?' asked Knox eventually.

He shrugged again. 'Fuck knows. That's for you to find out, isn't it?'

Monday, eight days later

Gallan

But we never did find out who poisoned Shaun Matthews.

Five days on, and after much internal discussion, the likeliest scenario suggested that, for whatever I reason, Jean Tanner had been the one. The theory, t agreed by all the original investigating team, but with absolutely no evidence whatsoever to back it up, was that there had been some sort of relation- : ' ship between Tanner and Matthews, but it had | ended before his death and, for whatever reason, 4 there'd been bad blood between the two of them. Being a girl who liked to throw her favours around, she was also seeing Craig McBride, and had got him to supply her with the poison to get rid of her ex-boyfriend. McBride was the only person we could think of who might have had the means to obtain it, almost certainly when he'd been out in Bosnia. He was also stupid enough to think that he could get away with it by making Matthews's death look like an accident. Jean had undoubtedly

thought the same way, and had administered the fatal dose to her unsuspecting ex.

Then, a few days later, we'd paid a visit to McBride and he'd panicked, thinking we were getting too close. He'd gone round to talk to Jean, they'd had an argument, and at that point she'd decided that he was now a liability. Maybe he'd been suggesting she come clean and tell the police, or something like that.

Jean had acted decisively. Somehow, she'd managed to obtain and inject him with a huge quantity of heroin and, unable to get rid of the body, had left to plan her next move, before finally deciding that it was probably best to return and make out that the whole thing had been an accident. Bur ley, then, had probably not been as corrupt as I'd first thought and, rather than trying to protect her as a favour to Vamen, he was simply being too lazy to do his job properly, and his obnoxiousness was natural rather than artificially created. Fair enough. Hopefully some day, someone in charge would notice it, and he'd suffer as a result.

We'd brought Jean Tanner in for questioning and Berrin and I had kept her in for twenty-four hours while we'd interrogated her. She might have been a weirdo (although I have to say I found her to be pretty level-headed) but she was no fool and, knowing that the police had nothing on her bar theories, had denied everything. She didn't know who'd killed Shaun, she hoped they caught whoever it was, and, as for Craig McBride, that had been a tragic accident that had taught her the dangers of drugs. When I'd pointed out that

McBride had had a phobia about needles, her jaw had dropped, her eyes had widened, and she'd simply said, 'Really? How odd.' In the end, we'd had to let her go. Benin had been pissed off, and was particularly concerned that a woman who might well have committed two murders in the space of a couple of weeks was walking the streets unmolested.

'Let me tell you something,' I'd told him. 'Crime can sometimes be a good short-term career move, sometimes it can even be quite a good medium term one, but I promise you this, it's never a good long-term one. They all get caught in the end. If she is a psycho and she really did kill those two blokes, then somewhere down the line, she'll try it again, and she'll come unstuck. In the meantime, just make sure you don't ever go out with her.'

'Do you think she did it?' Benin had asked.

'Thinking it and proving it are two very different things. If I can't prove it, then I prefer not to make a judgement. Probably is all I'd say. Probably.'

It was a sunny morning in early September and I was walking down Cleveland Street towards the Middlesex Hospital. My mobile rang. It was Malik.

'John, how are you?' His tone was cheery, which wasn't really a surprise. The object of his last year and-a-half's work, the Holtz family and their immense criminal enterprise, was finally unravelling. Some might even say it had something to do with my perseverance.

'I'm well, Asif. You?'

'Very good. Look, the reason for my call, it's a

thanks, really, for all the work you've done, and to let you know that this morning we arrested Vamen and six of his associates on a whole variety of charges relating to their activities. And Merriweather's continuing to sing like the proverbial canary.'

'I'm glad he's proving useful. It's a pity he's got to get immunity, though.'

'Well, he's not going to get full immunity. There are a couple of charges he's going to be facing, and he might get a nominal spell inside.'

'Not nearly as much as he deserves, though.'

'You know the score, John. Sometimes you've got to swallow your principles when you're dealing with people like that. Whatever happens, he's a marked man for the rest of his life. I'd rather not be in his boots.'

'Any sign of the bodies? Franks and the others?'

'We're still searching that maggot farm but I'm not optimistic. The maggots will have eaten all the flesh and apparently the bones were ground down afterwards. It seems they've done it with a few people.'

'I bet they have. What about the knife in the Robert Jones murder?' Merriweather had told us that Joe Riggs had been at the Fowler murder scene that night, and had retrieved the knife and the tape from Fowler's briefcase while the nightclub owner was being murdered. He had then weighed down the objects in a strongbox, and chucked them in the Thames.

'Nothing yet, but we're still looking.'

The think that's my only regret in all this,' I said,

f I

'that we didn't get a chance to bring either Franks *

or Matthews to trial for the killing.'

'In a way it's better this way, isn't it? There wasn't a huge amount of evidence against them. They could easily have got off, and then the family would have been devastated. At least now they know that the people who took their son away have paid a pretty heavy price.'

I wasn't so sure. All we had was Merriweather's word for that. Maybe he'd been more heavily involved than he'd let on, which would have explained why he'd co-operated so quickly when it J had become obvious to him that the police were on | the scent. If so, he was going to get off scotfree. f

Malik asked me if I'd kept the family informed of what had been going on. 'I have as much as possible. I think they realize now that no-one's ever going to go to prison for the murder but, like you say, maybe it's better this way.' Not that I really believed it.

'I'm going to have to buy you lunch sometime soon,' said Malik. 'When things have settled a bit. I'll give you a call, OK?'

'Sure,' I said, doubting if I'd be eating a slap-up meal on SO7 for a while yet. 'That'd be nice.'

We said our goodbyes, and I walked into the hospital entrance.

Iversson

I was sitting up in bed in my hospital room and thinking about how I was going to get out of this

situation. It didn't look good. They had two armed coppers guarding me in shifts round the clock. I was obviously a real VIP. Very Important Prisoner, that is. One thing was for sure, I wasn't going to be fighting my way out. Not only was I absolutely fucking exhausted, I also had a minor blood infection, and the wound in my shoulder was making the use of my right arm next to impossible. I was just going to have to front it and hope for the best. I'd thrown the Clock into a wheelie bin in Clerkenwell while I was on the way back to Elaine's apartment on that final, fateful day when the bitch had finally showed her true colours, so at least there was no way that could be used against me. Most of my co-conspirators were dead, and if Elaine and whoever the gunman with her was didn't break (and I had no reason to think they would), I might just be able to scrape through unscathed. I'd been taught anti-interrogation techniques back in my army days so I was reasonably confident I could hold my own, even in my weakened state. As the days had passed and my wounds had slowly healed, so my pecker battered so badly (quite literally) by my experience with Elaine, and Joe's betrayal - was finally going back up again. I will tell you something about me: I am nothing if not resilient.

I'd almost escaped, too, even after all the shit those bastards had put me through. While Gallan had been occupied by Elaine and the bloke with her, I'd grabbed the holdall with the money, opened up the window, and chucked it onto the roof of a parked Audi before jumping out myself and

landing arse-first on the holdall and the roof. Unfortunately, in my haste, and due to my somewhat disorientated state, I'd neglected to put any clothes on and, though I'd made a manful bid for freedom, limping naked along the street with near enough half a million quid on my back, I was always going to look a little bit too conspicuous to be able to melt, commando-like, into my surroundings. I did manage about two hundred yards, though, with half a dozen coppers chasing me Benny Hill-style on foot, before a vicar, of all rucking people, who was cycling to his morning church service, had leapt from his environmentally friendly transport and rugby-tackled me from behind. That was it, then. I'd had enough. With even men of the cloth against me, I knew it was the end of the road.

But since then I've perked up. You know what they say: it ain't over till it's over. Believe it.

I leant over and picked up the book I was reading: *How to Get Ahead in Business*. You see, I was thinking of opening my own survival school, and after all that had happened there weren't going to be many people better placed to teach survival than me. It was going to have to be from scratch, of course, now that the ransom money from the Holtz job had been lifted by the forces of law and order, but I knew it could be done.

There was a knock on the door and I looked up. It was Gallan again, looking quite spruced up by his standards, a smile on his face.

I tell you, I didn't trust that bastard one inch.

'Hello, Max/ I said, entering the room. I stopped at the end of the bed. 'The doctors say you're healing fast. Should be out of here in a few days.'

'That's right, and when I do, I don't want you lot on my back. I've co-operated as much as possible and I'm not saying anything else, apart from I don't know what the fuck you're talking about with all this kidnapping and killing lark. Is that clear?'

I smiled, used to Iversson's clumsy attempts at putting me in my place. 'Clear as a bell.'

'Because I've got bigger fish to fry now/ He showed me the book he was reading. How to Get Ahead in Business. Somehow I didn't think Richard Branson would be quaking in his boots. I've always been legit, and that's how I intend to stay. I've held up my hands to that assault on those coppers who stopped me, but I was under duress at the time. So, I'm hoping to get bail, and to start again.'

'I don't think that's going to happen, Max.'

Iversson's expression hardened. It wasn't a pretty sight. 'Why the fuck not? I haven't done anything. If it's about that money, I had nothing--'

I held up my hand to quieten him. 'It's nothing to do with the money you were carrying.' Looking surprised, he stopped speaking. 'Max Iversson, I'm here to inform you that you are under arrest at the request of the German federal authorities who wish to question you with regard to the murder on the twenty-sixth of February 1993 of Elsa Kirsten Danziger.'

Iversson looked at me in utter disbelief, then seemed to slump in the bed. 'I don't believe this. You'll be blaming me for John F. fucking Kennedy next.'

He really looked put out, and I might even have been tempted to believe him if I hadn't already heard that the sample of DNA taken from him in the hospital a week earlier had been confirmed as matching that of the killer. He was one of the better liars I'd come across.

I turned slowly and walked away, thinking it was ironic that we would probably never solve the Matthews case, yet its investigation had almost single-handedly provided the clues that had successfully concluded so many others. As I thought about Neil Vamen languishing in a cell of his own design, it also proved my point that crime might have been a viable short-term business opportunity, but as a long-term career it was always the wrong move. And as the technological aids open to the police become more and more advanced, so even the crimes of the short-timers will come back to haunt them. Be sure your past will always find you out, as a preacher might say.

When I got back to the station, I went straight to the Matthews incident room, now the incident room for the investigation into the attempted murder of eighteen-year-old Barry Sevringham, knifed in the neck the previous night in a pub fight in King's Cross. The world was already moving on, as were the criminals, never ones to sit around. Berrin was in there, as was WDC Boyd. Everyone

else, I assumed, was out talking to witnesses and possible suspects. They both smiled at me as I walked in, and I thought that Boyd was looking good. She had red lipstick on, and it suited her. I hadn't seen much of her these past couple of weeks and it struck me then that I'd missed her company. Maybe I'd see a bit more of her now we were working on the same case. I hoped so.

'The DCI'd like to see you/ said Berrin, motioning towards the office he'd been using for the Matthews inquiry.

'Do you know what it's about?'

They both said they didn't, but I thought I saw the traces of a smile on Boyd's red lips. I knocked on the door and went in.

'John/ said Knox, who was sitting behind the desk, 'come in and sit down.'

I did as I was told. 'What can I do for you, sir?' I asked.

'Your work's been excellent these past few weeks/ he answered, and waited briefly for the obligatory thanks, which he got, before continuing. 'Thanks in no small part to your efforts, and your persistence in the Matthews inquiry, it looks like we've got a number of results. The north London underworld's in a lot of trouble as a result of the dismantling of the Holtzes, and it's particularly good to be able to close the file on the Robert Jones case, and to give his family some sort of opportunity to move on. I've recommended to the superintendent that you be commended for your work on the Jones case, and I've also got a letter here from SO7 stating how much help your work's been.'

'Thank you, sir. It's always nice to be appreciated.'

'But that's not what I asked you in here for.'

'Oh?'

'I want you to know that I've also recommended that you be considered for a DI post here at the station, and that the recommendation's been accepted.'

I allowed myself a smile. That's excellent, sir. Thanks very much. I wasn't aware there was actually a vacancy.'

'Well, an unexpected one's come up on this team,' said Knox. 'DI Capper's asked for a transfer, and he's moving on to another station.'

'Really? I thought he was very happy here.'

Knox didn't say anything for a moment, clearly debating with himself how much it was worth letting on. 'Suffice to say some information came in from an anonymous source that didn't cast him in a very positive light, and it seems that a number of officers in the station are aware of it. He didn't think his position here was tenable and he's moving to another division next week. He's also dropping back down to DS level.'

So, there was justice in this world, and, more importantly, in the Metropolitan Police.

'Between you and me,' he added in a loud whisper, 'it turns out he was something of a regular visitor to Heavenly Girls, which put him in a bit of a compromising position, and we can't afford that. Better to get him out of the way rather than have the embarrassment of him remaining here with everyone knowing about it.'

Somehow I managed to keep the smile off my face. 'It's bad news losing such an experienced officer/ I said worthily, remembering that it's always best to play the game.

I wondered who it was who'd dobbed him in. It was either Jean Tanner or Benin. Jean had told the two of us when the tape had been off that he'd been a long-standing and not particularly well-liked customer at Heavenly Girls (apparently he had a lot of difficulty getting it up, an unfortunate affliction for which he tended to blame the girls). I suspected that it might have been Benin. Just a hunch, but it made sense. Jean was too much of a cold-blooded pro. Me, I would have kept the information to myself. You never know when it might have come in useful.

So, you'll take up the post, then?'

Wild horses wouldn't have stopped me. 'Of course I will, sir. When's it effective from?'

Knox smiled. 'Now,' he said. 'You're in charge of the Barry Sevringham case. Here's what we've got so far.'

Iversson

I never meant to kill her, that's all I can say. I'm going to be pleading not guilty by reason of temporary insanity, or whatever the defence is these days. There was no way I was in the right frame of mind when I bashed her head in that night. I'd been driven mad by her constant shagging of other men, and women, plus the fact

that she didn't care one fucking whit that I knew S about it. And that Johnny Hexham reckoned he had 1 girlfriend problems! He should have hung round with Elsa for a few days. She went through bodies like an overworked mortician. In the end, it just got too much, I snapped, and the rest is history. It was bad what I did, and I feel terrible about it, but I'm not the only villain in all this. She brought a lot of it on herself. And that Fenzer did smack her around a bit earlier on that night, I saw him do it. I heard that he often hit women, so he got what he deserved as well, didn't he?

Anyway, who the fuck ever said life was fair?
Not Max Iversson, that's for sure. Never has been,
never will be.

Epilogue

Max Iversson was charged with the kidnapping of Krys Holtz, and is currently in custody awaiting trial. He has also been charged in absentia with the murder of Elsa Danziger, and is the subject of extradition proceedings being brought by the German government.

Neil Vamen was charged with murder, extortion and importation of Class A drugs, and is currently awaiting trial. None of the charges relate to the events covered here.

Jack Merriweather is being held in a segregation unit at Belmarsh Prison, London, where he too faces charges relating to the importation of Class A drugs. He is to be the prosecution's main witness in the trial of Neil Vamen and six of his associates.

Elaine Toms was charged with the attempted murder of Max Iversson but was granted bail and promptly absconded. She is currently at large.

Jean Tanner has a new boyfriend and as yet faces no charges in connection with either the murder of

Shaun Matthews or Craig McBride. Police are keeping a close eye on the boyfriend's health.

Asif Malik remains at SO7, where he's concentrating his investigation on several north London crime families who have had something of a bonanza since the collapse of the Holtzes.

And me, well, I'm a DI again, and at least halfway back to the position I was in a year ago.

You see, there is justice in this world. It's just that sometimes it can take a long time to show itself.

THE END

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THE CRIME TRADE

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'Where's the money?'

'Where's the gear?'

'Gear?'

Stegs kept his expression neutral. The dope. The drugs.
The stuff we're buying.'

The Colombian allowed himself a tiny smirk. It reminded Stegs of the expression Barry Growler, a notorious bully at his old school, used to pull before inflicting one of his famous punishments. 'It's close to here,' he said.

'So's the money.'

'OK. That's good.'

'I'm going to need to see the gear first, before I hand over any cash. I'll have to test it, see that the quality's right.'

'You don't trust me?' asked the Colombian, his hands raised in a gesture of jovial innocence. The smirk grew wider.

Stegs didn't like the look of it at all, but that was the thing in their game. You couldn't trust anyone, and not only that,

you could never tell how they were going to behave either. This was his first time dealing with Colombians and he couldn't help thinking about the scene in that old Al Pacino film, Scarface, when Al and his mate, Angel, go to a Miami hotel to buy some coke from a group of Colombians, only for the sellers suddenly to pull guns on them and use a chainsaw on Angel's head in a (surprisingly futile) bid to get Scarface to reveal the whereabouts of the money. No, Stegs was not enjoying this meeting one little bit.

Neither was his colleague. Paul 'Yokes' Vokerman. Yokes was sitting in a chair next to Stegs, across the table from the Colombian, Fellano, and he was fidgeting big-time, like he had crabs.

Fellano, on the other hand, was oozing confidence, but then he also had three bodyguards scattered about the hotel room, and Stegs would have bet a grand no problem that they were all packing firearms. Under those circumstances, he had pretty good reason to be confident.

Now it was Stegs's turn to smile. 'It's not like that, Mr Fellano.'

'Jose, please.'

'Jose.' Jose. Typical. It had to be fucking Jose. 'It's not like that, but you have to understand my position. I have to satisfy myself, and my partners, that the goods are genuine. We've only done business once before, on a much smaller scale, and I don't want there to be any complications or misunderstandings this early in the relationship.'

'Of course. You are right. We don't want any ... misunderstandings.'

Stegs didn't like the way Fellano emphasized the word 'misunderstandings'. In fact there wasn't anything he liked about him, and he knew Yokes felt the same way. Fellano was about forty-five, possibly a couple of years older, and well built with a large, square-shaped head and features that were berry dark and more South American Indian than hispanic. He was dressed very smartly, but without ostentation,

and he had an amiable air about him which Stegs had seen

on serious criminals plenty of times before, and which he knew would disappear faster than a bun at a weightwatchers' convention the moment you got on the wrong side of him. Stegs was keen for that not to happen.

He pulled a weighing machine out of the bag and put it on the desk, hoping that it would act as a hint, which it did. Fellano turned in his chair and nodded to one of the bodyguards, who was leaning against the opposite wall, next to the kingsize bed with the silk sheets. The bodyguard left his post and walked into an adjoining room, emerging a few moments later with a briefcase. He brought the briefcase over to the table and handed it to Fellano. There was a moment's pause while Fellano fiddled with the locks, then the briefcase flicked open. He put it on the table with the open part facing Stegs. There was a single kilo bag of coke in there.

Stegs stared at Fellano. 'Our deal was for twenty kilos, not tor one. I was under the impression you were a major player.'

'Come on, Steve, we're wasting our time here,' said Yokes, using the codename for Stegs he always liked to stick to.

Fellano didn't even look at him. Instead, he addressed Stegs. 'You talk about trust, Steve, and I understand that, but tell me this. How can I trust you? You could be anyone. You could be a police officer for all I know.'

'I think my colleague might be right, Mr Fellano. Maybe we are wasting our time here. I thought I'd provided you with all the credentials you needed, plus twenty grand of our money for that first kilo. If you still don't think I'm kosher after all that, then there's nothing I can do about it.' Now it was Steg's turn to start getting up. 'Maybe you ought to look for another buyer.'

'I have the rest of the consignment nearby, but I now wish to see the money.'

'OK, but I want to see the rest of the gear at the same time.'

Fellano nodded. 'Sure, I understand that.'

"The money's not here, but it's also nearby. I'll show you it, Mr Fellano, and one of your men, but I'm not going

outside with all of you. It's too risky. We'll arouse suspicion.'

'Then your partner will need to stay here.'

Yokes looked at Stegs, his expression one of concern. 'I told you this was a waste of time, Steve. We don't need to deal with people like this.' He stepped away from the table.

Stegs put his hand up. 'Hold on, Paulie. Wait a minute.'

'What's the point? We're just getting taken round the houses here.'

'Because I didn't drive all the way over here for nothing, that's why.' He turned to the Colombian. 'All right, Mr Fellano, here's what I suggest. My man stays here with two of yours, then you, me and your other guy take a walk down to wherever you've got the stuff. You show it to me, and after that, if you want, I'll take you to the money. Then we return here and make the transaction. How does that sound?'

Yokes wanted to say something, but Stegs gave him a look that said 'Come on. don't blow this!' and Yokes appeared to relent, although he didn't look too happy about it. But that was the thing about the drugs business, particularly the high end. The complete lack of trust meant that even a routine retail transaction required a half-hour debate and more than a couple of heart-stopping risks.

Fellano thought about it for a moment. 'OK,' he said, nodding slowly. 'That sounds fair.'

Stegs turned to his mate, who'd now sat down again. 'Are you all right with staying here for a few moments, Paulie?'

'No, not really. Maybe you should stay here.'

'We've decided,' said Fellano with some finality. 'You stay here.'

Stegs patted Yokes on the shoulder. 'Till only be gone a few moments and I don't think Mr Fellano here is reckless enough to cause any problems in a hotel room with thin walls in the middle of Heathrow. Am I right, Mr Fellano?'

'I want this deal done as much as you do, Steve, even if your friend is not so keen.'

'He's just cautious, that's all.'

'A man can get overcautious.'

'Not in this game,' said Stegs, with a cold smile. 'So whereabouts nearby is the other nineteen kilos you promised?'

'In the trunk of a hire car in the parking lot.'

Stegs nodded. It wasn't an ideal location, but it was wet and windy outside, so they probably weren't going to get too much attention. 'Shall we go, then?'

'Are you sure about this, Steve?' asked Yokes.

'I'll be ten minutes. No more. Then we do the deal and we walk.'

Fellano stood up and motioned for one of the bodyguards - a wiry little guy with a droopy moustache and seventies hair - to come with him. He then said something in Spanish to the other two. Yokes looked nervous, and Stegs felt a pang of guilt, having given him the worst job. The job of hostage. But he couldn't see any other way.

'Let's go,' said the Colombian, and he and Moustache walked to the door.

Tell him to get his fucking shades off,' Stegs said to Fellano. 'He'll stick out a mile in them on a wet March day at Heathrow airport.'

Fellano gabbled something else in Spanish, and Moustache took them off, giving Stegs a dirty look as he did so. Stegs ignored him. 'I'll be back in a mo, Paulie, all right? Just stay here and keep these two company.'

Yokes looked at the two silent Colombians watching him from the far wall, then back at his partner. 'Don't be long,' he said.

Ten minutes,' Stegs answered. Ten minutes max.'

No-one spoke in the lift down to the ground floor, and when the doors opened, Stegs hung back while the two Colombians walked through the busy reception area and out of the rear doors that led directly into the hotel's car park. After

spending a few seconds perusing a selection of the day's newspapers and magazines that were laid out on a low mahogany table, he walked casually in the direction they'd taken.

It was raining steadily outside and the cloud cover was so grey and thick that the day was almost dark. Only a handful of people were scattered about, and they were mainly businessmen, hurrying along under umbrellas, so immersed in their working lives that not one of them even glanced up as he passed.

He walked between the rows of parked cars and made his way towards the back of the car park, keeping ten or twelve yards behind the Colombians, watching for anyone who looked out of place. A middle-aged man in jeans and a Barbour jacket getting out of his car caught his eye, but the man looked away without interest, and the moment passed.

When the two Colombians got to the last row of cars, parked against a high brick wall that marked the car park's boundary some fifty yards from the hotel, Fellano looked left and right as nonchalantly as possible, then back at Stegs. Stegs smiled like he knew them both, then quickened his pace and caught up, walking between the two of them without speaking as they approached a new metallic-blue BMW 7 Series. A typical high-end dealer's car. It made Stegs wonder whether BMW approved of the fact that so many of its customers were involved in the illicit drugs trade. Perhaps one day they'd end up sponsoring crack dens.

Fellano stopped three feet from the back of the car and deactivated the alarm.

Upstairs in the hotel room, Yokes Vokerman paced nervously, trying to ignore the two other men in the room as they watched him boredly; one by the door, the other against the opposite wall. Yokes had expected there to be the usual to-ing and fro-ing, as there always was on a big deal like this one, but he hadn't wanted to be the one left up here with the Colombians while Stegs went walkabout. It had happened before of course, them being split up on an op. More than once, since nobody ever took you at your word in the drugs game; except this time, it shouldn't have happened. They'd been told by the handlers to bring the money into the room

with them, but instead had opted to keep it back, thinking it would show they were serious buyers (i.e. distrustful) if they turned up without it. Which was now looking more and more like a mistake. This meeting had been in the making for weeks, months even. The Colombians had their credentials, knew their backgrounds - their pedigree in the importation game - and there'd already been a test purchase of a kilo, for which they'd handed over twenty grand. And still they didn't seem satisfied.

Since he and Stegs had arrived more than an hour ago, they'd been thoroughly searched, before undergoing a long and repetitive sequence of questions from Fellano about deals they'd done, people they were meant to know, etc. The Colombian had been trying to read them, to probe for weakness, not so much in their accounts of themselves, but in their characters, and Yokes was beginning to convince himself that the reason for this was that he was on to them. Knew who they were and was working out what to do about it. Fellano was a ruthless man. He had a reasonably good reputation in the marketplace (as much as anyone who sells hard drugs has a reasonably good reputation), but cross him - give him any reason to doubt you - and you could expect no mercy. Vokes had heard a rumour once that Fellano had personally cut the tongue out of a police informant's mouth back in Cali, and had replaced it with the man's penis. It wasn't a thought he wanted to dwell on.

He kept pacing, telling himself that it was he who was getting too paranoid. What possible reason was there to suspect the two of them? As always, they'd played everything just right, their stories standing up even to the closest scrutiny, their demeanour that of men not to be trifled with. And with back-up just round the corner, ready to move in if anything looked like it was going to go wrong. But even bearing all this in mind, Vokes didn't like the fact that he was split up from his partner and stuck in a hotel room with two armed men who insisted on wearing sunglasses on a wet English afternoon.

The phone on the bedside table rang, shattering the heavy silence.

Yokes stopped. Dead.

Slowly, he turned and stared at it. So did the two Colombians. It rang again, a long, shrill tone that seemed far too loud for the room. Who the hell was this meant to be?

An urgent message in his head said: Run! Get out of there! In fact, it didn't just say it, it screamed it. RUN! GRAB THE DOOR HANDLE, TURN IT, AND GET YOUR ARSE OUT OF THERE!

He glanced at the two Colombians, who were looking at each other, their expressions puzzled. The phone rang a third time.

One of them strode over and picked up the receiver. At the same time, the second Colombian, perhaps reading their hostage's thoughts, produced a silver Walther PPK from inside his suit. He pointed it at Yokes and motioned him to get on the bed. 'Now, now,' he demanded impatiently.

Yokes looked over at the other Colombian, the one on the phone. He hadn't said anything since he'd picked it up but was listening to someone on the other end, at the same time staring hard at Yokes. He too removed a gun from his pocket - a Glock, Yokes reckoned. It didn't seem like he was pleased by whatever it was he was hearing.

Yokes thought of his two young children and realized then that he was too old for this game; that this was the last time he'd ever go undercover; that no more would he attend clandestine meetings in bleak hotel rooms with men who'd kill him without a second's thought because that was what life was worth where they came from - nothing. He realized too that he was beginning to panic for the first time ever on an op, an unfamiliar feeling of dread spreading through him like a poison, and that was another reason why Stegs should have been up here in this room instead of him, because he was always able to handle the pressure.

'Get on the bed, now.'

The words came from the one holding the phone, except

now he wasn't holding it, he'd replaced it in its cradle, and his expression behind the glasses was angry. He walked over, gun waving, and grabbed Yokes by the arm, pushing him towards the bed. Yokes tried to sit on it, but was roughly pushed face down. He could feel the barrel of the Glock against the back of his head.

'Stay there, do not move,' said the gunman, before adding something to his colleague in Spanish.

Yokes was shaking, shaking with absolute fear, and he could feel the sweat from his forehead sliding onto the sheets. He offered a silent prayer to the Lord, but it didn't make him feel any better. He had never been so scared in his life because he knew that this was the closest he had ever been to death. And all the time he was wondering who the hell had made that phone call, what they'd said and, most importantly of all, when the cavalry were going to show themselves.

The boot opened to reveal a leather briefcase similar to the one Fellano had shown them upstairs. He and Stegs leant in, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, while Moustache stood back. Fellano undipped the locks and opened the case. A quick count revealed nineteen kilo bags of white powder inside.

'Are you satisfied, my friend?' the Colombian asked with a smile.

Till need to test it, a sample from each bag.'

'Of course, we will do that back in the room.'

Stegs nodded, standing back up as he shut the briefcase and closed the boot. Till go and get the money and catch you

up,' he said. 'My car's just over there.'

Fellano raised an eyebrow to indicate that he wasn't sure about this change of plan.

'We'll look too conspicuous going over and staring in the boot of my car as well,' Stegs told him, 'and now I know you've got the stuff, plus my colleague, I've got no incentive not to bring it up to the room.'

Fellano still didn't appear convinced and gave him a hard stare in an attempt to prise out any lies from behind his eyes, but Stegs kept his business expression firmly on his face, and eventually the Colombian relented. 'All right, but I want to get this deal sorted out right now, so hurry up. I have a plane to catch.'

Stegs felt like telling him that if he hadn't messed them around so much earlier he'd have had a lot more time, but instead he turned and walked away in the direction of the parked Merc fifty yards further along the row of cars. When he'd gone about twenty yards, he turned and saw Fellano and Moustache walking back to the hotel, Fellano's ample wedge of black hair flying comically about in the high wind. He was talking on a mobile, and Stegs wondered who it was he was speaking to, and what exactly he was saying.

He reached the Merc, flicked up the boot and removed the holdall, putting it over one shoulder. Fellano and Moustache had slowed right up in the middle of the car park, waiting for him. Reluctantly, he started after them, wondering just how conspicuous they wanted to be, and why they didn't want to wait five minutes in the warmth of the hotel room for him to arrive, rather than hanging about in the rain.

When he was within about twenty yards of them, something caught his eye. Three smartly dressed men - two black, one white - in raincoats and flat caps were getting out of a car a few yards behind the Colombians and to their right, and one of them was watching them intently from behind a pair of glasses that looked brand new and didn't seem to fit his face.

The man didn't look right, not at all. Neither did the other two. They might have been dressed smartly but they weren't like any normal businessmen Stegs had ever met. Who on earth wears a baseball cap with a suit? Maybe the odd fashion casualty, not three together. There was something else too. They were hard bastards, you could see it immediately; it's not a look a man can hide very easily. He also noticed that the one with the glasses was holding something under his coat.

Straight away he knew it was a gun, most likely a shotgun, and straight away he knew that it was there to be pointed at Fellano. Instinctively, he slowed down. At the same time, Fellano turned in Stegs's direction, tapping his watch in a gesture of impatience, and then suddenly a look of shock crossed his face.

Stegs froze as he heard the sound of rapid footsteps behind him, and the next second something hard and metallic was being pressed into his back. 'Don't fucking move,' hissed his assailant, ripping the holdall from his shoulders, 'or you're dead. I'll blow your fucking spine out. Got that?'

'It's all yours,' said Stegs calmly, making no move to resist, too busy looking straight ahead of him at the scene unravelling in what felt a lot like slow motion. Moustache was reaching into his pocket for a gun while Fellano himself simply stood there, mouth open, watching Stegs, still completely unaware that the three men were making straight for him and the briefcase, weapons now appearing from under their coats. Stegs was right about the shotgun; it was a nasty-looking sawn-off pump-action, and it was pointing straight at Fellano's back.

At that moment, Fellano must have heard them, or seen something out of the corner of his eye, because he swung round in their direction. Moustache turned as well, an Uzi coming out from his jacket, and Stegs, still standing there as his assailant secured the holdall, knew then that this was going to get very very messy.

'Give us the fucking case!' screamed the man with the shotgun, now only five yards from Fellano.

At the same time, Moustache aimed the Uzi at the three robbers, pushing his boss out of the way and going for the safety at the same time. Beyond the group, Stegs could see those people in earshot turning round to see what on earth was going on, utterly transfixed by the shock of the surreal scene being played out in front of them. It was a first for Stegs as well, and difficult for him to get his head round, because even in his sort of game you didn't expect everyone

suddenly to go for the guns and start shooting. That sort of thing belonged firmly in Hollywood films.

'Drop the fucking gun!' yelled the pistol-wielding white robber as he caught sight of the Uzi for the first time, but it was already too late.

Shotgun screwed his face into a snarl and, still coming at his target, pulled the trigger.

And that was when all hell broke loose. Moustache flew backwards, the force of the blast lifting him off his feet, while his Uzi suddenly kicked into life, its thirty-two rounds discharging at the sky in a shrill clatter as his grip on the handle loosened. He hit the ground hard and the shotgun roared again, the noise making Stegs's ears ring. This time, though, it missed its target and blew a gaping hole in the tyre of a people carrier opposite, immediately setting off the alarm.

Someone somewhere let out a scream. Someone somewhere else shouted: 'Armed police, drop your weapons!'

The white robber had reached Fellano now and was trying to wrestle the briefcase out of his hand, with the help of one of his colleagues. Meanwhile Shotgun was waving his weapon in the direction of the dozen or so men in casual clothes - all wearing black caps - who were now appearing from among the cars, guns drawn, closing in on the scene.

'Armed police! Drop your weapons!'

But you could see straight away that Shotgun was not going to go quietly. This was a man who had never gone quietly anywhere in his life. His face screaming defiance, he pointed the weapon at a youngish guy in jeans and a leather jacket who was just coming round the back of the people carrier, an MP5 outstretched in both hands.

The cop made the decision no-one with a conscience ever likes to make, and he made it quicker than his target. Two bullets cracked out of the MP5, hitting Shotgun in the upper

body. Another cop also fired from behind a Nissan, the same two-shot double tap, this time the rounds striking their target in the face.

Shotgun whirled round, still holding the weapon, still

trying to fire, and then a third two-shot volley struck him in the side of the head, the final bloody coup de grace. He died immediately, staring in Stegs's direction, the shotgun slipping out of his hands and discharging for a third time as it hit the ground in a final gesture of defiant rage, the blast setting off another car alarm.

No-one else decided to go out the hard way. Fellano's hands shot skywards, and the other two robbers made the same gesture, although far more slowly, the shock of their predicament taking a little longer to register. At the same time, two cops in caps came round from behind Stegs, and he was pushed roughly to the ground. He just managed to get a glance at the man who'd relieved him of his holdall getting the same treatment five yards away before his face was pushed into a puddle and the cuffs were unceremoniously forced on his wrists.

The hotel room was on the fifth floor and the same side as the car park, so even with the soundproofing the shots and the general cacophony of the confrontation were clearly audible.

Vokes heard his two guards talking rapidly to each other in Spanish, and his fear grew even more intense. He was shaking violently, the dread at what might happen to him becoming almost unbearable. If I get out of this, then that's it, he told himself. I'm retired. Not just undercover, but the whole thing. They had a codeword if things went wrong but he didn't want to draw attention to himself by using it, and anyway, help should have been here by now. They were only in the next room. What was keeping them? Hurry up! he silently cursed. Get your arses moving! Let me get back to my family. Please, Father. Please, Lord. Not for me, but for them.

One of the Colombians had stopped at the end of the bed. Vokes could sense it. Then he heard the door opening, the sound of movement and shouting in the corridor outside, and he was already thanking the good Lord for listening to his

prayers when the silencer spat and the bullet ripped through the back of his head and into his brain.

Paul Vokennan's executioner was twenty-eight-year-old Manuel Lopez, known as Manolo to his friends, a long-term junior member of the Cali cartel and an ex-soldier in the Colombian army, now resident in London. He was a killer by trade and, as Yokes had suspected, thought no more about ending a life than he did about taking a leak. It was, after all, just business.

Manolo fired a second round into the back of Vokes's head, just to make sure, then turned towards the open door where his colleague, twenty-six-year-old Pedro Daroda, was standing. He could hear the noise of footsteps coming from outside, then the staccato bark of orders, and he realized they'd been betrayed. Pedro stepped out into the hallway, raised his gun, and then fell backwards as shots rang out. Manolo ran over to the side of the bed furthest from the door, then crouched down, gun pointed out into the hallway, thinking that he was at least going to make it difficult for them.

A black-clad figure half appeared round the door, gun outstretched, and Manolo fired twice, both rounds hitting the burgundy-coloured wall in the hallway as the cop stepped back. A second later, a second cop appeared round the other side of the door, and started firing. Manolo let off a shot but was forced to turn away as the bullets passed over his head, the noise of them bursting in his ears. Suddenly there was a much louder bang somewhere near the foot of the bed, and he became disorientated and unable to see properly. It was as if somebody had force-fed him a bottle of whisky and dropped him on his head from the fifth-floor window, and he knew they'd used a stun grenade. But, even dazed, he still held the gun as the black-clad police in breathing apparatus came into view and, with a gesture of defiance that perfectly mirrored the expression of the man with the shotgun in the car park below, raised it in front of him, aiming at the first officer's crotch.

Sergeant Phil Winter of Scotland Yard's elite firearms squad SO19 didn't hesitate. He'd already seen the body of DC Paul Vokerman face-down on the bed, a growing bloodstain soaking the sheets around his head; now one of the suspects, hunched down in the corner of the room beside the bed, was lifting his gun. Two shots, then a step, two shots, then another step, then another two shots, every one of them finding their target. Beside him Constable Sammy Jecks opened up with his MP5, and the body of Manuel Lopez did a strange dance as the bullets ripped into his head and body and charged about his insides, ripping them and him apart.

Minimum force. The training always says only the minimum amount of force possible must be used to incapacitate a subject. Shoot him too many times, particularly when it's clear he's no longer a threat, and a police officer leaves him or herself open to charges of manslaughter, or even, in extreme cases, murder. But Winter couldn't resist pumping another two into the Colombian's guts as he continued towards him, knowing that statistically he probably wasn't going to get another opportunity to pop a bad guy. Lopez's head slumped, the Glock with silencer fell from his dead hand, and Winter stopped in front of him, before kicking him hard in the face.

Jecks rushed up to Vokerman and tried to find a pulse, but Winter could tell from the expression on his colleague's face that it was a lost cause. He turned to the door as the senior officers involved in what was supposed to have been a highly successful sting operation entered the room along with the remainder of the SO 19 team. They did not look too happy.

And that, unfortunately, is where I, DI John Gallan, join the tale, being one of those senior officers involved. The thing is, I was only meant to be there as an observer, as was my colleague, WDS Tina Boyd, but I don't think that fact made either of us feel any better. It had been our informant who had provided the details and false character references that had set up Mark 'Stegs' Jenner and Paul 'Yokes'

Vokerman, both members of Scotland Yard's specialist undercover unit, SO 10, with a group of high-level Colombian drug traffickers, so as Tina and I followed DCS Noel Flanagan and DI Asif Malik of Scotland Yard's organized crime unit, SO7, into the hotel room, I was experiencing a feeling in my insides that was a nasty combination of fear, shame and nausea. As I saw the ruined bodies of Manolo Lopez and Yokes Vokerman, one of whom I'd got to know quite well over the past few weeks, watched the frantic efforts of the medical team as they worked their futile magic, and heard DI Malik curse loudly under his breath, the question I remember I kept asking myself was a very simple one. What the hell had gone wrong?

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